

Asthma Information for WellCare Members

What is Asthma?

Asthma causes swelling and inflammation in the airways leading to the lungs. When the disease flares up, the airways tighten and narrow. This keeps air from passing through easily. That makes it hard to breathe. These flare-ups are called asthma attacks. Another name is exacerbation. Asthma affects people in many ways. Some only have asthma attacks during allergy season. Some have them when they breathe in cold air. Or when they exercise. Others have many bad attacks. They need to see the doctor often. Even with only a few attacks, you still need to treat the problem. The swelling and inflammation can lead to permanent changes in the airways. This can harm your lungs. Many people with asthma live active, full lives. Even though asthma is a lifelong disease, treatment can control it and keep you healthy.

What Causes Asthma?

Experts do not know exactly what causes asthma. But there are some things we do know:

- Asthma runs in families.
- Asthma is much more common in people with allergies. Not everyone with allergies gets asthma. And not everyone with asthma has allergies.
- Pollution may cause asthma or make it worse.

What are the Symptoms?

Symptoms of asthma can be mild or severe. You may have mild attacks now and then. Or you may have severe symptoms every day. Or you may have something in between. How often you have symptoms can also change. When you have asthma, you may:

- Wheeze, making a loud or soft whistling noise. This happens when you breathe in and out.
- Cough a lot.
- Feel tightness in your chest.
- Feel short of breath.
- Have trouble sleeping because of coughing or having a hard time breathing.
- Quickly get tired during exercise.

Your symptoms may be worse at night. Severe asthma attacks can be life-threatening and need emergency treatment.

How is Asthma Diagnosed?

Your doctor will do a physical exam and ask about your health. He or she may order lung function tests. These tests include:

- Spirometry. Doctors use this test to diagnose and keep track of asthma. It measures how quickly you can move air in and out of your lungs and how much air you move.
- Peak expiratory flow (PEF). This shows how fast you can breathe out when you try your hardest.
- An exercise or inhalation challenge. This test measures how quickly you can breathe after exercise or after taking a medicine.
- A chest X-ray, to see if another disease is causing your symptoms.

- Allergy tests, if your doctor thinks your symptoms may be caused by allergies.

You will need routine exams by your doctor to keep track of your asthma and decide on treatment.

How is it Treated?

There are two parts to treating asthma. The goals are to:

- Control asthma over the long term. To do this, use a daily asthma treatment plan. This is a written plan that tells you which medicine to take. It also helps you track your symptoms and know how well the treatment is working. Many people take controller medicine—usually an inhaled corticosteroid—every day. Taking controller medicine every day helps to reduce the swelling of the airways. It can also prevent attacks. Your doctor will show you how to use your inhaler correctly. This is very important. You need to get the right amount of medicine to help you breathe better.
- Treat asthma attacks when they happen. Use an asthma action plan. It tells you what to do when you have an attack. It helps you find triggers that can cause your attacks. You use rescue medicine, such as albuterol, during an attack.

If you need to use the rescue inhaler more often than usual, talk to your doctor. This is a sign that your asthma is not controlled and can cause problems. Asthma attacks can be life-threatening. But you may be able to prevent them if you follow a plan. Your doctor can teach you the skills you need to use your asthma treatment and action plans.

How Can You Prevent Asthma Attacks?

You can prevent some asthma attacks by avoiding those things that cause them. These are called triggers. A trigger can be:

- Irritants in the air, such as cigarette smoke or other air pollution. Don't smoke. Try to avoid being around others when they smoke.
- Things you are allergic to such as pet dander, dust mites, cockroaches, or pollen. When you can, avoid those things you are allergic to. It may also help to take certain kinds of allergy medicine.
- Exercise. Ask your doctor about using an inhaler before you exercise if this is a trigger for you.
- Other things like dry, cold air; an infection. Some medicines, such as aspirin and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Try not to exercise outside when it is cold and dry. Talk to your doctor about vaccines to prevent some infections. And ask about what medicines you should avoid.

Sometimes you don't know what triggers an asthma attack. This is why it is important to have an asthma action plan that tells you what to do during an attack.

References

Healthwise, Incorporated. Asthma in Teens and Adults. Author: Maria G. Essig, MS, ELS. Medical Review: Caroline S. Rhoads, MD (Internal Medicine), Harold S. Nelson, MD (Allergy and Immunology). May 15, 2007.

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