

DESCRIPTION

Asthma involves blockage of normal airflow into and out of the lungs. The blockage develops when certain allergens or irritants are inhaled and cause a reaction in the airways. They become swollen (inflamed), produce excess mucus, and the airway muscles tighten. This leads to the wheezing and other symptoms like chest tightness, rapid shallow breathing, coughing (especially at night), breathing difficulty and neck and chest may be sucked in with each breath.

SEVERE SYMPTOMS OF AN ASHTMA ATTACK MAY INCLUDE:

- Cough that sounds tight and dry.
- Rapid heartbeat and abnormal rapid rate of breathing that becomes more labored.
- Unable to speak more than a few words without pausing for breath.
- Sweating, and much anxiety and distress.

CAUSES

The exact cause of asthma remains unclear. It may be due to a combination of genetic factors, certain factors that may sensitize the airways (such as animal dander and dust mites), and contributing factors (such as childhood respiratory infections). Risk also increases with smoking or exposure to second-hand smoke, exposure to occupation irritants or allergens and air pollutants.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Symptoms can be controlled with treatment.
- Half of all children with asthma will outgrow it.

TREATMENT MEASURES

- Your health care provider will do a physical exam and ask questions about your symptoms. Medical tests may include x-rays, pulmonary-function tests, an exercise tolerance test, and allergy testing (usually with skin tests).
- Treatment will depend on the severity of the symptoms. It may include medications given daily or during an attack, avoiding triggers, lifestyle changes, self-care, and education.
- Stay active but avoid sudden bursts of activity. If an attack follows exercise, sit and rest. Sip warm water.
- Drink plenty of fluids daily to help loosen secretions.
- Identify and avoid your particular triggering factors. Treatment for desensitization to specific allergens may be recommended.
- A peak flow meter may be used at home. It is a small device that measures how well air flows into and out of the airways.
- Hospital care may be required for severe attacks.

MEDICATIONS

Asthma medications are generally divided into two categories:

- **Quick relief:** Medications prescribed for relief of asthma exacerbations or to prevent exercise-induced asthma symptoms.
- **Long-term control:** Medications prescribed for use on a daily basis to prevent symptoms.
- Oral steroids may also be prescribed to reduce inflammation.
 - You should begin your steroid prescription today.
 - You should begin your steroid prescription tomorrow.

Your doctor also recommends the following over-the-counter medications. These medications may offer significant symptom relief:

- For fever or pain use acetaminophen or ibuprofen.
(Acetaminophen and ibuprofen may also be alternated every 3 hours for persistent fever or pain.)
- Antihistamine
- Decongestant (Such as Phenylephrine or Pseudoephedrine)
- Mucolytic (Such as Guaifenesin)
- Cough Suppressant (Such as Dextromethorphan)
- Throat Lozenges
- Saline Nasal Spray or Drops
- Decongestant Nasal Spray (Limit use to 3 days)
- ↳ Unless your doctor tells you differently, always finish the full course of your steroid prescription, even if you start to feel better.
- ↳ Steroids may interfere with the effectiveness of birth control pills. Use an alternative method of contraception for the remainder of the month after finishing your or steroid prescription.

SEEK MEDICAL ATTENTION IF:

- Symptoms don't improve, despite treatment.
- Peak flow is in a zone about which you are concerned.