

What You Don't Know About Asthma Can Hurt You

Asthma is a disease that affects the air passages in the lungs. People with asthma have supersensitive airways. With asthma, the muscles within the small air passages of the lungs go into spasm and narrow the airways causing coughing, wheezing, breathing difficulties, and chest tightness. Asthma is an episodic disease – symptom-free periods alternate with acute attacks. Asthma is a physical problem, not an emotional one (although stress, anxiety, or frustration can cause asthma to worsen).

A variety of triggers can set off asthma attacks.

- Having a respiratory tract infection (cold, flu, bronchitis, sinus infection).
- Breathing an allergen like pollen, mold, animal dander, or particles of dust or smoke.
- Taking certain medicines, such as aspirin, beta-blockers, and ACE inhibitors.
- Showing strong feelings, including laughing and crying.
- Exercising, especially in outdoor cold air.
- Changing temperatures and humidity levels.
- Having sulfites. These are additives found in wine and some processed foods.

Asthma attacks range from mild to severe and treatment varies accordingly. Asthma is too complex to treat with over-the-counter preparations. A doctor should diagnose asthma and monitor your condition. He or she may prescribe one or more medications. Some kinds are to be taken with an asthma attack. Other kinds are taken daily (or as prescribed) to help prevent asthma attacks.

If you have asthma, follow these self-care measures:

- Don't smoke. Try to stay away from smoke and air pollution.
- Drink plenty of liquids (2 to 3 quarts a day) to keep secretions loose.
- Figure out what triggers your asthma and eliminate allergens or irritants at home and at work.
- Make a special effort to keep your bedroom allergen-free. For example, use a plastic or allergen-free cover on your mattress and pillow (if you use one).
- Discontinue vigorous exercise immediately if you start to wheeze.
- Wear a scarf around your mouth and nose when you are outside in cold weather to warm the air as you breathe it in. This will prevent cold air from reaching sensitive airways.
- Avoid foods and medications that contain sulfites. These preservatives are found chiefly in shellfish and wine. (Sulfites may trigger asthma attacks in as many as 10 percent of asthmatics.)
- Sit up during an asthma attack; don't lie down.
- Always keep your asthma rescue medication handy. Take it as soon as you feel an attack.
- Be cautious about using aspirin – some asthmatics are allergic to it. Use acetaminophen instead.

If you consult a doctor for help in controlling your asthma, he or she may prescribe any of the following:

- Anti-inflammatories. These drugs help with swelling in the airways. They are taken as oral pills or inhaled medicines.
- Bronchodilators. These drugs relax the muscles of the airways and open up the air passages in the lungs. A metered-dose inhaled with a device called a spacer is a common way to take these drugs.
- Leukotriene modifiers. These oral medicines help reduce chronic inflammation.
- A peak flow meter. This device helps you monitor your asthma at home.
- An annual flu vaccine.