

Asthma Fact Sheet

What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that affects 22 million people in the United States. People of all ages and races may develop asthma. Asthma can be life threatening if not well controlled, but with proper care people can lead full, active lives.

Asthma inflames and narrows the airways. This makes the airways swollen and very sensitive. They tend to react strongly to certain substances that are breathed in. When the airways react, the muscles around them tighten. This causes the airways to narrow and less air flows to your lungs. The cells in the airways make more mucous which is a thick sticky substance that further narrows your airways.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

Common asthma symptoms include wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness and coughing, especially at night or early in the morning. These symptoms prevent air from easily moving in and especially out of your lungs.

For many people the symptoms of asthma are mild and intermittent and for some the only symptom is recurrent episodes of cough.

Not all people who have asthma have these symptoms. Likewise having these symptoms doesn't always mean you have asthma. Lung function tests (spirometry and peak flow meter readings) done along with a medical history (including type and frequency of your symptoms) and physical exam is the best way to diagnose asthma.

Triggers

A number of things can bring about or worsen asthma symptoms. Your clinician will help you find out which things (sometimes called triggers) that may cause your asthma to flare up if you come in contact with them. Triggers may include:

- Allergens found in dust, animal fur, cockroaches, mold, and pollens from trees, grasses, and flowers
- Irritants such as cigarette smoke, air pollution, chemicals or dust in the workplace, compounds in home décor products, and sprays (such as hairspray)
- Certain medicines such as aspirin or other non steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and nonselective beta-blockers
- Sulfites in foods and drinks
- Viral upper respiratory infections such as colds
- Exercise (physical activity)

It is important for you and your clinician to identify your asthma triggers and to work together to develop a plan to minimize your exposure and maintain optimal lung function.

Management and Education

New asthma treatment guidelines, published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2007, have been developed by a panel with expertise in asthma management. Regular clinician visits with the same provider are important. Spirometry testing provides information about small and large airways and demonstrates abnormal lung function as well as response to treatment. Peak flow meter measurements are useful to monitor variations in large airway capacity. Additional studies may be recommended in order to identify environmental exposures so that controls may be initiated.

Education about the disease should take place at every medical visit. Ask questions! Take responsibility for knowing as much about your asthma as possible and participate in your care by seeing your clinician regularly. Monitor your asthma status at home, follow your medication management plan, and do what you can to control environmental causes.

Helpful websites:

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/aboutnae.pp>

National Lung Association <http://www.lung.ca/asthma>

Medications

A wide variety of medications are available for the treatment of asthma. **Quick relief** medications provide prompt relief of airflow obstruction and constriction of the airway. **Long-term control** medications are used daily to counteract inflammation and to achieve and maintain control of persistent asthma. Frequently, both types of medication are given in inhaled form to best reach the affected areas and minimize side effects. The severity and persistence of your symptoms determine which medications will be prescribed. Your clinician will work out a medication management plan suited to your individual needs.

Be sure to get a flu shot yearly and Pneumovax which is a vaccine that protects against a certain bacterial strain of pneumonia.

Smoking and Asthma

The National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) states that tobacco smoke is the most toxic indoor air pollutant that triggers asthma. Smoking diminishes the beneficial effects of inhaled steroid medications. NHLBI recommends that those with asthma should not smoke or be around second hand smoke.

Check our website: www.uhs.berkeley.edu to learn more about this medical concern or others.

For an appointment www.uhs.berkeley.edu or call **510-642-2000** Clinic Nurse **510-643-7197** for advice