

Asthma is a condition that is caused by inflammation and narrowing of the airways. This results from the contraction of the muscles lining them and causes breathing difficulties particularly in breathing out.

What to look for

- sudden shortness of breath and wheezing and occasionally coughing
- chest infections
- nose irritations and sneezing, even hay fever may accompany an attack
- restlessness or insomnia.
- tightness in chest.

These symptoms are not always present. It is not completely understood why some people get asthma, however, it is known that asthma is made worse by certain irritants called trigger factors.

Inflammation of the airways is the body's reaction to these triggers and this results in an asthma attack. Some people only suffer very mild attacks and for others the condition is serious enough to warrant specialised medical care.

If you have asthma, you should be monitored by a Health Professional regularly, and you must seek immediate medical intervention for a serious episode. By identifying your triggers, you can learn to lessen the intensity and frequency of asthma attacks and perhaps even avoid them completely.

Asthma is not a problem with breathing in, but with breathing out. During an asthma episode, muscle spasms and swelling bronchial tissues narrow the lungs' tiny airways, which then become clogged with excess mucus. Stale air gets trapped in the bottom of the lungs, forcing you to use the top part to gasp for air. Mild and moderate episodes consist of short incidents of breathlessness and wheezing. In severe cases, the lungs' airways become so narrow and clogged that breathing is impossible.

Asthma is fairly common. Up to one in every 10 adults and about one in every 5 children and young people are affected by asthma.

Causes

If you have asthma it means that your airways are sensitive to certain trigger factors. The most common substances to cause attacks or at least asthma type symptoms are pollen, grass, dust mites, animal fur, certain foods and food additives, mould, cigarette smoke and animal dander.

When inhaled, these substances can trigger the release of histamine and other body chemicals, causing an allergic reaction and asthma episodes. An allergic reaction is an over reaction to something by the body's natural defence system.

Other changes in environment can bring on an attack and these are also known as trigger factors - exercise, changes in air temperature, coughing, laughing, breathing deeply, strong smells, and certain medications.

Certain chemicals can trigger asthma - perfumes, paint fumes, grain and flour dusts, sawdust from timber. The symptoms may occur several hours after you were exposed to the chemical.

Other triggers are medications such as aspirin and anti-inflammatory drugs, beta-blockers.

Viral respiratory infections are common triggers. Therefore try to avoid people with these infections.

Traditional Treatment

To determine if you have asthma, your doctor will probably administer a pulmonary function test, which measures the strength of your exhalation. Certain medications may be prescribed for this condition.

If you have asthma, you should see a doctor regularly... For severe episodes, conventional medical treatment is always necessary. However, a number of alternative treatments can be helpful when used in conjunction with conventional therapy.

Following a diagnosis of asthma, your first step should be to work with your doctor to develop a treatment or management plan. As part of this plan, the physician might ask you to keep a daily diary, noting environmental and emotional factors that bring on asthma episodes. This not only will help the doctor monitor the disease but will help you recognise and avoid your asthma triggers.

Alternative/Natural Treatments

Many people have had success with alternative asthma treatments, but even advocates recommend these methods only as complements to conventional therapies. **Remember:** Once diagnosed, asthma should be monitored by a doctor.

- **Aromatherapy** - Clary Sage, Cypress, Frankincense, Rosemary, Thyme. These herbs are not to be inhaled, they can be used in a vapouriser or put in a carrier oil and used for massaging purposes.

- **Herbal Therapies** - Elecampane (*Inula helenium*), acts as a soothing expectorant, may help clear the body of excess mucus.
- **Homoeopathy** - For more remedies and appropriate dosages, you will need professional help.
- **Yoga** - Yoga can help you learn to breathe deeply and to relax,
- Soy milk as alternative to milk
- Be able to identify your triggers
- Avoid foods and drinks that contain artificial colourings, flavourings, and preservatives, dairy products (as they are mucus forming)
- Gentle aerobic exercise can help strengthen the heart and lung areas.

When to seek further professional advice

- You or a person with you suffers from any of the symptoms above for the first time or if they are suffering from a particularly severe episode
- the prescribed asthma medicine does not work in the time it is supposed to... You need a new prescription
- you or the person with asthma feels as if they are suffocating, making it difficult to talk; Get immediate emergency treatment.