

ASTHMA

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

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, produce excess mucus, and other symptoms. Asthma affects all ages but 50% of the cases are in children under age of ten. Boys with asthma outnumber girls. In adult-onset asthma, women are more often affected.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Chest tightness and shortness of breath
- Wheezing upon breathing out
- Coughing, especially at night, may have thick, clear or yellow sputum
- Rapid, shallow breathing that is eased by sitting up
- Breathing difficulty that gradually gets worse
- Severe symptoms of acute attack:
 - Cough that sounds tight and dry
 - Rapid heart-beat
 - Abnormal rapid rate of breathing that becomes more labored
 - Unable to speak more than a few words without pausing for breath
 - Sweating
 - 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 INCREASES WITH

- Other allergic conditions, such as eczema or hay fever
- Family history of asthma or allergies
- Exposure to air pollutants
- Smoking and exposure to second hand smoke
- Stresses (viral infection, exercise, emotional upset, odors)

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

No specific preventive measures for original disease. Avoiding risk factors where possible may help.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Symptoms can be controlled with treatment and strict adherence to prevention measures. Without treatment, severe attacks can be fatal.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Respiratory failure
- Pneumothorax
- Lung infection and chronic lung problems from recurrent attacks

GENERAL 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 tests (usually skin testing).
- Treatment will depend on the severity of the symptoms. It may include daily drug therapy, drug therapy for attacks, avoiding triggers, lifestyle changes, self-care, and education. A written treatment plan is usually provided. It should be followed carefully.
- Identify and avoid your particular triggering factors.
- Counseling may help, if asthma is stress-related.
- 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. You will be instructed on its use.
- Treatment (allergy shots) to desensitize the immune system to specific allergens may be recommended.
- Hospital care may be required for severe attacks.

MEDICATION

Medications including inhalers or oral medications are used for treatment.

ACTIVITY

- Stay active, but avoid sudden bursts of exercise. If an attack follows heavy exercise, sit and rest. Sip warm water. Treatment with bronchodilators often prevents exercise induced asthma.
- Swimming is perhaps the best exercise for asthma patients.

DIET

- No special diet, but avoid foods to which you are sensitive.
- Drink plenty of liquids daily to keep secretions loose.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- You have an asthma attack that doesn't respond to treatment, this is an emergency!
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.
- Peak flow is in a zone that causes you concern.

Student Health Center



WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC

This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.