

Patient information factsheet

Asthma

Asthma is a common long-term condition that can cause coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and breathlessness.

The severity of these symptoms varies from person to person. Asthma can be controlled well in most people most of the time, although some people may have more persistent problems. Occasionally, asthma symptoms can get gradually or suddenly worse. This is known as an “asthma attack”, although doctors sometimes use the term “exacerbation”. Severe attacks may require hospital treatment and can be life threatening, although this is unusual.

Causes

Asthma is caused by inflammation of the small tubes, called bronchi, which carry air in and out of the lungs. If you have asthma, the bronchi will be inflamed and more sensitive than normal. When you come into contact with something that irritates your lungs – known as a trigger – your airways become narrow, the muscles around them tighten, and there is an increase in the production of sticky mucus (phlegm).

Common asthma triggers include:

- house dust mites
- animal fur
- pollen
- cigarette smoke
- exercise
- viral infections

Asthma may also be triggered by substances (allergens or chemicals) inhaled while at work. Speak to your GP if you think your symptoms are worse at work and get better on holiday. The reason why some people develop asthma is not fully understood, although it is known that you are more likely to develop it if you have a family history of the condition. Asthma can develop at any age, including in young children and elderly people.

Symptoms

The symptoms of asthma can range from mild to severe. Most people will only experience occasional symptoms, although a few people will have problems most of the time.

The main symptoms of asthma are:

- wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe)
- shortness of breath
- a tight chest – which may feel like a band is tightening around it
- coughing

These symptoms are often worse at night and early in the morning, particularly if the condition is not well controlled. They may also develop or become worse in response to a certain trigger, such as exercise or exposure to an allergen.

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Treatment

If you have asthma you should be able to lead a full and unrestricted life. For most people, treatments are effective and should enable you to keep the condition under control.

Inhalers

Asthma medicines are usually given by inhalers – devices that deliver medication directly into the lungs as you breathe in. This is an effective way of taking an asthma medicine as most goes straight to the lungs, with very little ending up elsewhere in the body. Each inhaler works in a slightly different way. You should have training from your GP or nurse in how to use your device or how to help your child use theirs. This should be checked at least once a year.

Spacers

Pressurised canister inhalers can work better if given through a spacer – a hollow plastic or metal container with a mouthpiece at one end and a hole for the inhaler at the other. When using a spacer, the vapour from the inhaler is released into the container, where it is held while you breathe in slowly and progressively until your lungs are full. You should then hold in your breath before relaxing so the vapour has time to settle in your lungs. This can make the medication more effective because much more of it reaches your lungs and much less stays in your mouth or is swallowed, where it has no effect on your lungs but is more likely to cause possible unwanted effects.

Once you've been discharged from hospital, you may find your symptoms persist for several days or weeks after. This is not uncommon, however if you are worried about this at all, seek help from your GP. They should have all the information regarding your treatment in hospital. If you have been issued with medication, it's very important to complete the course.

Who to contact if you are concerned

If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links

NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/conditions/asthma/Pages/Introduction.aspx

Have your say

We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card before you leave. It's your chance to have your say on the treatment you have received in hospital. Feedback helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

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The information in this factsheet has been adapted from NHS Choices www.nhs.uk

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