

WHAT IS ASTHMA

Asthma...does the word make you think of people who cough and wheeze all the time? Don't people with asthma have to avoid sports and strenuous activities? And, when it comes right down to it, isn't it "all in their heads?" If you're one of the 20 million Americans with asthma, you challenge stereotypes like these every day. Learn all you can about asthma. It's the first step toward erasing these long-held myths and living a full, active life.

Asthma is a disease in which the airways become blocked or narrowed. These effects are usually temporary, but they cause shortness of breath, breathing trouble, and other symptoms. If an asthma episode is severe, a person may need emergency treatment to restore normal breathing.

An estimated 20 million people in the United States have asthma and, despite the availability of treatments, it remains poorly controlled among many. This health problem is the reason for nearly 500,000 hospital stays each year. People with asthma can be of any race, age or sex. Its treatment costs billions of dollars each year.

Despite the far reaching effects of asthma, much remains to be learned about what causes it and how to prevent it. Although asthma can cause severe health problems, in most cases treatment can control it and allow a person to live a normal and active life.

- **Allergic (extrinsic) asthma (asthma symptoms triggered by an allergic reaction):** Characterized by airway obstruction and inflammation that is at least partially reversible with medication and is always associated with allergy. Allergic asthma is the most common form of asthma. Many of the symptoms of allergic and non-allergic asthma are the same (coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or rapid breathing, and chest tightness). However, allergic asthma is triggered by inhaling allergens such as dust mites, pet dander, pollens, mold, etc. Through a complex reaction, these allergens cause the passages in the airways of the lungs to become inflamed and swollen. This results in coughing, wheezing and other asthma symptoms.
- **Non-Allergic (intrinsic) asthma (asthma symptoms triggered by factors not related to allergies):** Like allergic asthma, non-allergic asthma is characterized by airway obstruction and inflammation that is at least partially reversible with medication, however symptoms in this type of asthma are NOT associated with an allergic reaction. Many of the symptoms of allergic and non-allergic asthma are the same (coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or rapid breathing, and chest tightness), but non-allergic asthma is triggered by other factors such as anxiety, stress, exercise,

cold air, dry air, hyperventilation, smoke viruses or other irritants. In non-allergic asthma, the immune system is not involved in the reaction, as with allergic reaction.

With allergic and non-allergic asthma, it is primarily a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways. This means that people with asthma have inflamed airways which causes two secondary symptoms:

(1) The bronchi, the airway branches leading to the lungs, become overly reactive and more sensitive to all kinds of asthma triggers such as allergens, cold and dry air, smoke and viruses. Also,

(2) the lungs have difficulty moving air in and out, which is called airflow obstruction. Together, these symptoms cause the tertiary symptoms the coughing, wheezing, tight chest and worse.

SOURCE: This information should not substitute for seeking responsible, professional medical care. First created 1995; fully updated 1998; most recently updated 2005.

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