

RECOGNIZING AND MANAGING ASTHMA

What is asthma?

Asthma is a disease that causes inflammation of the airways to the lungs. This causes the airway to become narrower, which obstructs airflow in and out of the lungs. Allergens are substances that are inhaled that make the airway more sensitive which can trigger an asthma attack.

What causes an asthma attack?

When asthma is not controlled, the sides of the airway stay inflamed, making it easier for an allergen to trigger an attack. The airway begins to narrow and less air moves in and out of the lungs. In some cases, the airway is completely blocked off, which becomes a medical emergency. Triggers for an asthma attack can include: cigarette smoke, dust around the house, allergies to animals with fur, cockroaches, strong fumes or sprays, pollen, cold air, and exercise.

What are symptoms of asthma?

- Cough
- Wheeze
- Tight Throat
- Tight Chest
- Shortness of breath
- Pain with breathing
- Tired, Feeling like you don't have any energy

How do I manage asthma?

Communicate with your doctor and set up an individualized plan for your asthma. Doctors will often have kids and adolescents use a peak flow meter to measure your ability to push air out of your lungs. This is rarely used in adults, but can be used when medicines are changed or there is a change to the asthma action plan to measure the status of these changes. Two types of medications are often prescribed for the treatment of asthma include:

- **Quick relief medication (rescue inhaler):** These provide quick relief to relax the airway to make breathing easier (ex: Albuterol). These are used if you have symptoms less than two times per week and are often prescribed before exercise to decrease the chances of an attack during physical activity.
- **Long term control:** These reduce swelling and inflammation in the airways. They help prevent swelling from the beginning and decrease the frequency of attacks. They do not provide quick relief and take longer to have an effect (ex: inhaled corticosteroid). They are used if you have symptoms more than two times per week and must be taken everyday to be effective.

Other ways to manage asthma at home are to decrease the triggers you may encounter:

- Bathe your pets frequently to reduce dander. Another option is to consider hypoallergenic pets.
- Stay inside when pollen counts are high.
- Minimize strong odors or perfumes. If painting, ventilate well. Use neutral body sprays and candles.
- Avoid smoking and being around second-hand smoke.

When should I contact my doctor?

If you are experiencing symptoms for more than two weeks, consult your physician. Asthma can become a medical emergency when a rescue inhaler does not decrease the spasm of the airway or when the airway is completely blocked off and you are not getting oxygen to your vital organs. If you experience this, call 9-1-1 immediately.