

# Asthma



Asthma is a very common disease in adults and children. It affects the lungs, causing narrowing of the air passages and difficulty in breathing. Most people have periodic episodes of shortness of breath, associated with wheezing and/or coughing, with normal breathing in between. The wheezy episodes may last for a few minutes or for days.

## What causes asthma?

Most people have an inherited predisposition to allergic conditions. Usually they have relatives with asthma, eczema, hay fever, and other allergic conditions. In other people, the symptoms appear to be triggered by a viral infection such as a cold, by exercise (particularly in cold air), or by irritant substances in the air, such as pollution, cigarette smoke, or industrial fumes.

Some individuals start wheezing after eating or drinking food containing certain preservatives and colourants, like sulphur dioxide or tartrazine. Others may be allergic to inhaled substances such as pollens, or dust containing house dust mites.

## Is asthma serious?

Many people have relatively mild attacks of asthma. People may develop a severe attack with severe shortness of breath, rapid pulse, sweating, and blueness of the lips (cyanosis). This constitutes a medical emergency, and hospital treatment is needed immediately.

## Should people with asthma participate in sport?

In between attacks, the asthmatic sufferer is completely normal, and as long as sensible precautions are taken, it is advisable for most asthmatics to take part in exercise, with the approval of a doctor.

Precautions may include taking an inhaler along to the sporting activity, taking a 'puff' of bronchodilator aerosol before exercise to prevent an asthmatic attack, and avoiding exercise at certain times (such as early morning when the air is cold and dry), if exercise at this time triggers an attack on a regular basis.

## How is asthma diagnosed?

The diagnosis is usually made by a doctor, who may refer the person with suspected asthma to a specialist in lung diseases for further tests. Asthma is often diagnosed in childhood, but may only occur later. Symptoms like coughing and wheezing most often lead one to suspect the diagnosis.

## How is asthma treated?

Unfortunately, there is presently no cure for asthma. The disease may be managed very successfully by a combination of identification and avoidance of any trigger factors, together with monitoring of the state of the lungs, and medication if necessary.

A severe attack requires treatment in hospital, but the chance of such a severe attack occurring is very much less if the sufferer (or the parent in the case of a child) learns to identify the warning symptoms, and to administer the medication as early as possible.