



Information for Patients & Caregivers

What you need to know about Asthma

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+ WHAT IS ASTHMA?

Asthma is a condition that affects the smaller airways in the lungs and makes it difficult for a person to breathe. This occurs because the air passages in the lungs swell, get narrower and fill with mucus. The extent of the narrowing and duration of each episode vary greatly in different people.

Asthma can start at any age, but the majority of cases start in childhood. Asthma also runs in some families but many people with asthma have no other family members affected.

The main symptoms of asthma include:

- Wheezing.
- Coughing.
- Chest tightness.
- Shortness of breath.

These symptoms can vary in severity from mild to severe. Adults with mild asthma usually have episodes of wheezing and coughing that occur 1 or 2 nights per week but are otherwise fine during the day.

People with severe attacks of asthma are usually very wheezy, tight chested, have difficulty in breathing, and are unable to talk due to breathlessness. Severe symptoms may develop suddenly in some people who usually just have mild symptoms. If your asthma symptoms become severe or worse, you must see a doctor immediately.

Asthma is usually treated with inhalers and this treatment usually works well to reduce or prevent symptoms. A person with asthma will typically take a preventer inhaler every day to prevent symptoms from developing and use a reliever inhaler if symptoms flare up.

Asthma is a long-term condition for many people particularly if it first develops in adulthood. There is no cure for asthma, but.

+ WHAT CAUSES ASTHMA?

Asthma is caused by inflammation in the airways of the lungs. This inflammation causes the muscles around the airways to contract thereby narrowing the airways and making it difficult for air to get in and out of the lungs. The inflammation also causes excess mucus to form in the airways leading to coughing and further obstruction to airflow.

People with asthma have sensitive airways that become inflamed when they are exposed to triggers. Triggers are factors in the environment that can worsen or cause asthma symptoms. They include:

- **Infections** - particularly common colds and chest infections.
- **Exercise.** Sport and exercise may worsen asthma symptoms in some people. If this is the case with you, then ensure you use an inhaler before exercise to prevent symptoms from developing.
- **Certain medicines** such as aspirin, ibuprofen, diclofenac. Ask your doctor about the list of medicines to avoid.
- **Smoke from tobacco fumes.** Both active and passive smoking can make asthma worse. Even when you don't smoke, tobacco smoke from other people may worsen your asthma symptoms.
- **Emotional factors** such as stress, crying or laughing.
- **Pollens, moulds and allergens** such as animal dander from pets and house dust mites.

+ WHEN SHOULD YOU SEE A DOCTOR?

It is important that you see a primary care doctor immediately if:

- **If you're worried that you have asthma.**

- **If your symptoms fail to improve, become more frequent or get worse after treatment.**

+ HOW IS ASTHMA DIAGNOSED?

To make a diagnosis of asthma, your doctor will take a medical history, perform a physical examination, and order some lung-function tests.

Asthma is also more likely to be diagnosed if your symptoms:

- Are worse at night or in the early morning.
- Are clearly triggered by exercise, allergies or infections, or have a seasonal pattern.
- Improve quickly with reliever medicine.

Your doctor will probably be able to diagnose asthma, but they may refer you to a specialist if they are not sure. Your doctor will assess your symptoms and your explanation of the symptoms and may give you asthma medicine to measure its effect. This is called a 'treatment trial'. Your doctor will monitor the effect of this medicine on you and will use the results to help make a diagnosis.

+ WHAT YOUR DOCTOR WILL DO

If your asthma is very serious, your doctor will give you fast-acting medicines to help reduce the breathing problem.

You may need to be admitted to hospital until the symptoms resolve.

+ ASTHMA ACTION PLAN

Upon discharge from hospital or after a review with your doctor, you will be given a personalised plan for dealing with your asthma.

An Asthma Action Plan is a list of instructions agreed by you with your doctor. It tells you what medicines you should use at home each day, the warning symptoms to watch out for, how to adjust the dose of your inhalers, based on your symptoms and other medicines to take, if the symptoms get worse.

+ HOW IS ASTHMA TREATED?

There are different kinds of medicines for treating asthma. These medicines can be inhalers, liquid or pills. Treatment will depend on your age and the seriousness of the asthma.

Inhalers: Most people with asthma are treated with inhalers. An inhaler delivers a small dose of medicine directly to the lungs. There are different inhaler devices, but your doctor will advise on which one is ideal for you. Medicines given by inhaler can be classified into 3 groups:

- **Reliever inhalers** contain medicine which reduces asthma symptoms by widening the airways. Examples include Salbutamol and Terbutaline
- **Preventer inhalers** contain steroids that reduce airway inflammation and so prevent symptoms from developing. The effect of steroid takes 7-14 days to build up and up to six weeks for maximum benefit. People with frequent symptoms or severe episodes might need to take this medicine every day. Examples include Fluticasone and Beclomethasone.
- **Long-acting relievers** may be given in addition to a preventer inhaler. They relieve symptoms by widening the airways for up to 12 hours at a time. Examples include Salmeterol and formoterol.

Steroid tablets: These are used for reducing inflammation in the airways. If you have severe asthma, your doctor may prescribe a short course of steroid tablets such as prednisolone to reduce your symptoms.

Nebulisers. These are machines that change the liquid form of your reliever inhaler into an

+ SYMPTOMS TO WATCH OUT FOR:

If you have any of the following symptoms, call an ambulance or go immediately to an Emergency Department:

- SEVERE WHEEZING
- DIFFICULTY IN BREATHING
- WORSENING COUGH
- BLUISH-COLOURED LIPS
- CHEST TIGHTNESS OR PAIN WHILE BREATHING
- DIZZINESS
- CONFUSION
- DIFFICULTY IN TALKING DUE TO BREATHLESSNESS

ALWAYS MAKE SURE YOUR DOCTOR KNOWS ALL THE MEDICINE YOU ARE TAKING AND WHETHER OR NOT YOU HAVE ANY ALLERGIES

+ PREVENTION OF ASTHMA ATTACKS

You can prevent or reduce the number of asthma attacks you typically experience by doing the following:

- Ensure your inhaler and spacer are always with you.
- If you are allergic to pet dander, keep pets away from you.
- If you smoke, you should stop and avoid staying around people that smoke as this could trigger a potentially fatal asthma attack.
- Ensure you follow the action plan given by the doctor and take your long-term control medicine as directed.
- People who are overweight should reduce their weight to improve their asthma symptoms.
- Ensure you are up to date with your vaccinations and get vaccinated against influenza every year.

TOP-TIP: It is important that you know how to use your inhalers correctly. Failure to use an inhaler correctly may cause symptoms to persist as the medicine from the inhaler does not get into the airways properly. See your doctor to learn the correct technique.

+ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Ministry of Public Health has published a National Clinical Guideline advising doctors on how to treat patients with Asthma. The Guideline is available to the public from the MOPH website: www.moph.gov.qa

