Asthma

What Is Asthma?
According to the American Lung Association, asthma is the seventh-ranked chronic health condition in the United States and the leading chronic illness of children. It is a chronic inflammatory disease that makes airways (bronchial tubes) particularly sensitive to irritants.

During an asthma episode, tightening of the smooth muscles around the bronchial tubes causes them to become inflamed, narrow inside, and produce excess mucus. This makes it difficult for air to pass in and out of the lungs and decreases the oxygen levels in the blood. A person suffering from an asthma attack has a sensation similar to drowning.

What Makes Someone Develop Asthma?
Some people are born with a predisposition toward developing asthma. However, what actually triggers the disease can vary from person to person. Common triggers include environmental tobacco smoke, air pollution, pollen, allergens from animals and insects, abrupt weather changes, biological contaminants such as mold, and viral infections.

Studies show that children whose parents smoke are twice as likely to develop asthma as children of nonsmoking parents. Also, children whose mothers smoked during pregnancy tend to be born with smaller airways, which greatly increases their chances of developing the disease.

How Can a Person Tell If He or She Suffers from Asthma?
Diagnosis is the first step in keeping the condition under control. Early warning signs include fatigue; coughing, even when the person does not have a cold; wheezing; difficulty breathing; tightness in the chest; runny nose; itchy throat; and a change in the thickness, amount, or color of the mucus.

Anyone regularly exhibiting any of the symptoms should see a doctor or allergist as soon as possible. The earlier it is diagnosed the earlier the condition can be gotten under control.

How Many People Suffer from Asthma?
An estimated 34.1 million adults have lifetime asthma and about 8.4 million children between the ages of 5-17 have lifetime asthma. Asthma is the leading chronic illness of children in the United States and the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness.

Asthma causes almost 500,000 hospitalizations and about 5,000 deaths annually. Health care costs associated with asthma are estimated at $14.7 billion a year. The number of deaths due to asthma, the number of Americans diagnosed with asthma, and the health care costs of asthma continue to increase each year.

What Can Be Done to Prevent Asthma and to Avoid Asthma Episodes?

- Do not allow smoking indoors unless there is a room reserved for smokers and which has a separate ventilation system to exhaust smoke outside. Never allow smoking around anyone with asthma.
- Try to keep humidity levels in the home between 30 and 50 percent. High humidity can promote growth of biological agents that may trigger asthma episodes. Use exhaust fans or open windows in the kitchen or bathroom areas when cooking, using the dishwasher, or taking showers. Make sure clothes dryers are vented to the outdoors, and use a dehumidifier in the basement if necessary.
- Avoid using humidifiers. If it cannot be avoided, clean it according to the manufacturer's instructions. Refill it daily with fresh water to prevent the growth of harmful microbes.
- Minimize exposure to combustion particles and gases that can cause breathing difficulties for people with asthma. Have combustion-powered furnaces, stoves, or heaters checked yearly to make sure they are operating properly. Change furnace filters according to the manufacturer's instructions, or every month or two during periods of use. Consider installing higher efficiency filters to reduce the number of particles in the air. Never use a gas stove to heat the home, and always use the exhaust fan when cooking on a gas stove.
- Keep the house clean to reduce allergens like microscopic dust mites, pollen, and animal dander. Use an allergen-proof comforter and encase mattresses and box springs in vinyl covers. Wash bedding frequently in hot (130°F) water. Avoid furnishings that collect dust. Try to eliminate cockroaches. Try to keep pets out of the bedrooms of family members with asthma. Consider using a high-efficiency vacuum filter or a vacuum system that is vented to the outside to clean the house. If possible remove the carpeting, drapes, and all upholstered furniture from the bedrooms of those suffering from asthma.

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