



Health News from the DCF Medical Team

ASTHMA

What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease of the lungs that causes inflammation and narrowing of the airways. In the US, about 23 million people have asthma and nearly 7 million are children. Asthma is the most common serious chronic illness of childhood and accounts for about 14 million missed school days per year. Children have smaller airways than adults do, which makes asthma especially serious for them.

What causes Asthma?

Many things can cause asthma and these will vary from person to person. The most common causes, or triggers, are:

- Allergens – mold, pollen, dust mites, animal dander
- Irritants – cigarette smoke, air pollution, strong fumes or odors such as perfumes
- Weather – cold air, high humidity, high altitude, sudden changes in weather
- Infections – flu, common cold, sinus infections
- Strenuous exercise

What are the symptoms of Asthma?

Each person's symptoms can be different, but the most common symptoms of asthma are:

- Wheezing (noisy breathing)
- Frequent cough – may be more common at night
- Shortness of breath – feeling of not getting enough air into the lungs
- Chest tightness

When symptoms become worse than usual, we call this an asthma attack. The lining of the airway swells and becomes more inflamed, mucus may clog the airway, and the muscles that surround the airway tighten. All of these factors cause the airway to narrow and make it increasingly difficult for air to move in and out of the lungs. Children having asthma attacks may also be irritable or anxious due to trouble getting enough oxygen. They may need to use their chest and shoulder muscles to breathe, their nostrils may flare, and talking may be difficult as they work harder to breathe.

What is the treatment for Asthma?

Treatment of asthma is individualized because each person's triggers and symptoms are different. Treatment is usually with two kinds of medication: a quick relief medication to stop symptoms and a long-term medication, called a "controller", to prevent symptoms. Both types of medications can either be inhaled or taken as pill. If an asthma attack occurs, treatment may also include other short-term medications such as antibiotics and steroids.

Can Asthma be prevented?

There is no cure for asthma, but it can be managed so that people with asthma can lead normal, healthy lives. To help prevent asthma attacks it is important to:

- Identify and minimize contact with triggers
- Take all medications as prescribed
- Monitor asthma symptoms, recognize early signs that symptoms may be worsening, and know what to do in an asthma attack

When is Asthma an emergency?

Symptoms that can be a life-threatening emergency and require immediate medical attention include:

- Severe coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath
- Difficulty talking
- Breathing hard and fast
- Chest and neck muscles pulling in when breathing
- Lips or fingernails turning blue