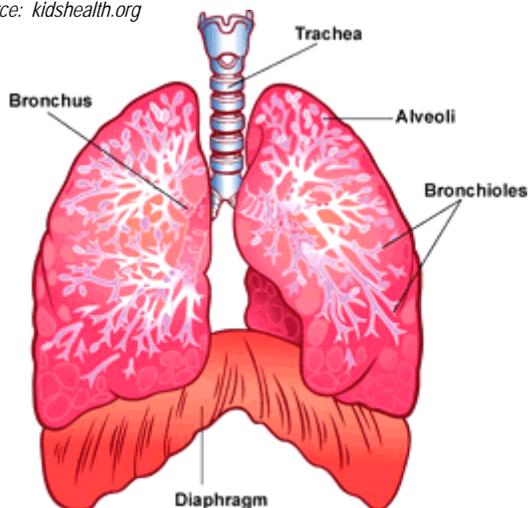


What is Asthma?

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

Image Source: kidshealth.org



What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that affects the airways of your lungs and your breathing. Your airways, or breathing tubes, are called bronchial (bron'-kee-ul) tubes. When there is an asthma flare-up or attack, the bronchials become inflamed and narrowed. There may also be mucus present along with the inflammation. These different changes make it difficult for air to pass through the bronchial tubes and into the lungs, creating problems with breathing.

In between flare-ups, breathing may seem normal. If you become ill, it may take several days to return to this normal baseline. Prevention of flare-ups is crucial. In addition, if symptoms do occur, early detection and treatment is needed to maximize health.

What are the symptoms associated with an asthma flare-up?

The symptoms associated with an asthma flare-up similar to the common cold, but asthma is not contagious. These symptoms include:

- Wheezing or whistling sound when breathing
- Coughing
- Feeling of chest tightness
- Difficulty breathing and/or short of breath

What causes asthma flare-ups?

The causes of flare-ups are called asthma triggers or allergens. Examples may include:

- Tobacco smoke
- Microscopic bugs called dust mites that live on particles of dust
- Animal dander
- Mold
- Pests such as cockroaches
- Dust
- Chalk
- Perfumes
- Pollen and grasses
- Viruses
- Breathing in cold air

How is asthma treated?

Asthma is treated with different medications depending upon the individual needs of each patient. These options can be in the form of inhalers, pills and liquid medications. Treatment will often depend upon how serious, how often, and how fast the flare-ups occur. Chronic asthma is treated with medications that reduce inflammation of the bronchial tubes. During an acute flare-up, bronchodilators are usually used to relax the muscles of the bronchial tubes and to allow air to pass more freely in and out of your airways.

Your doctor may also recommend an exercise plan to improve the health of your lungs and overall body. It is important to review any exercise plan with your doctor, especially if one of your triggers is induced by exercise.

Can flare-ups be prevented?

Many asthma flare-ups can be prevented by following your individual asthma management plan prescribed by your doctor:

- **Identify and control the asthma triggers to which you are sensitive.**

- *Avoid triggers through environmental controls such as:*

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| ✓ Frequent vacuuming | ✓ Changing air filters |
| ✓ Frequent dusting | ✓ Avoiding tobacco smoke in the home and car |
| ✓ Keeping pets out of bedrooms | |
| ✓ Cleaning bed linens and pillows | ✓ Ridding the home of pests such as roaches and mice |

- **Take medications as prescribed.**

- *Flare-ups commonly occur when the maintenance medication plan is not consistently followed.*

- **Watch for early warning signs of an asthma flare-up.**

- *Signs may occur a couple of hours to a couple of days prior to a flare-up:*

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| ✓ Sneezing, wheezing, coughing | ✓ General complaints of not feeling well or of feeling "funny." |
| ✓ Changes in breathing | |
| ✓ Changes in mood or energy level | |

- *Call your doctor when warning signs are present. Your (or your child's) asthma medications and management plan may need to be adjusted.*

- *Your doctor may recommend use of a peak flow meter, which is a portable device that you blow into like a balloon, to measure how well your lungs are working.*

Source: Nemours Foundation @ <http://kidshealth.org> Retrieved 11/05.

For more Patient Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web site at www.greenhosp.org and Click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education 1/06