

Asthma is a serious and occasionally fatal disease. However, with a careful diagnosis, expert medical treatment and responsible self-care, most people with asthma lead normal, healthy lives.

Causes

It is not exactly clear what causes asthma. Those who seem more at risk of developing the condition include individuals with a family history of asthma or allergies, or those who were exposed to tobacco smoke, infections and certain allergens early in life.

Symptoms

Common asthma symptoms include the following:

- Coughing that is often worse at night or early in the morning
- Wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when breathing)
- Chest tightness
- Shortness of breath
- Faster or noisy breathing
- Trouble breathing, especially at night and in the early morning

Attacks

Many factors can lead to an asthma attack. Some people may only have an attack if a combination of triggers is present. Asthma triggers are essentially anything that makes symptoms appear or worsen:

- **Allergens** – Animal dander (from their skin, hair or feathers), dust mites (contained in house dust), cockroaches, pollen from trees and grass, and mold (both indoor and outdoor)

- **Irritants** – Cigarette smoke, air pollution, cold air or changes in weather, strong odors from painting or cooking, scented products, strong emotional expression (including crying or laughing hard), stress and exercise
- **Other triggers** – Medicines such as aspirin and beta-blockers; sulfites in food or beverages; gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) that causes heartburn and can worsen asthma symptoms; infections; and irritants or allergens that one may be exposed to at work, such as special chemicals or dusts

Treatment

Treatments for asthma include:

- **Avoiding triggers** – Remove dust-catchers from the bedroom; keep humidity levels in your home low; consider using an air filter in the bedroom; do not smoke cigarettes or spend time in environments where others are smoking; try changing your workouts.
- **Medication** – Using preventive (long-term control) and rescue (quick-relief) asthma medications; sometimes allergy medications and shots are recommended as well.
- **Self-management** – Plans for controlling asthma daily and an emergency action plan for stopping attacks.

