

BREATHING EASY WITH ASTHMA

This pamphlet has been designed by the health care professionals at Marquette General Hospital to answer some of your questions about asthma. Remember that your situation is unique and treatment options are individualized. Sharing the information in this pamphlet with your family and friends can help them learn more about what you are experiencing.

After you have finished reading this pamphlet and discussed the information with your doctor or respiratory care practitioner you will be able to:

1. Explain what may trigger an asthma attack.
2. Discuss what happens during an asthma attack.
3. State what you can do to help relieve your distress during an asthma attack.

?? WHAT IS ASTHMA?

People with asthma have unusually sensitive lungs. Their airways can be irritated easily by a variety of substances that are harmless to most other people. When lungs are irritated, it makes it harder to breathe.

Things that trigger asthma attacks may come from irritants, allergens, infections and emotions such as:

- 1) Household Chemicals
- 2) Smoke
- 3) Pollen
- 4) Dust
- 5) Smog
- 6) Cold Air
- 7) Emotional Stress or Excitement
- 8) Animal Dander
- 9) Perfume
- 10) Paint Fumes
- 11) Exercise
- 12) Allergies
- 13) Upper Respiratory Infections

Learn what triggers your attack and take appropriate measures. You can keep some attacks from ever happening just by avoiding these things. For example, if smoke or pollution seems to trigger your attack, then avoid being in smoke-filled rooms and don't drive in rush hour traffic.

?? WHAT HAPPENS IN AN ASTHMA ATTACK?

Asthma, or reactive airway disease, is a two-part disease that affects the tubes of the lungs known as bronchi and bronchioles. The swelling (or inflammation) of the bronchioles is now thought to be the biggest part of asthma. Swollen bronchioles cause narrow airways and excess mucus, making it hard to get air in and out. This part of asthma is best treated with inhaled steroids. The second part of asthma occurs when the thin layer of muscle that surround each bronchiole tightens up. This, too, causes airway narrowing and is best treated with a group of inhaled drugs known as bronchodilators. Wheezing occurs when airways are very inflamed or tight.

Between asthma attacks you may not notice any symptoms at all; however your airways may remain swollen and inflamed. It is still very important to continue your medications as instructed by your physician.

?? IS THERE A CURE?

While there is no cure for asthma, recent advancements in treatment and medication now make it possible to dramatically decrease the number and severity of attacks. In fact, with proper medical care, many patients can completely control their asthma and experience no major symptoms at all.

?? HELPFUL HINTS

Asthma does not have to be a frightening disease if it is controlled properly:

- 1) Take your medicine as prescribed by your physician.
- 2) Remove the cause (trigger), if it can be found, especially animals, smoke, dust, household chemicals and perfumes.
- 3) Drink lots of fluids (unless your doctor tells you otherwise) to help thin mucus so it is easier to cough up.
- 4) Do breathing exercises. These can help you relax and slow down your breathing. Your nurse and respiratory care therapist will help you learn these exercises.
- 5) Monitor your “peak flows.” This is a simple test that can be done at home on a regular basis with inexpensive peak flow meter. The first sign of an asthma attack is often a decreased peak flow. Ask your physician if this is appropriate for you.
- 6) If your current medication dose(s) is not providing relief, seek medical help immediately.
- 7) Learn as much about your disease as possible.

?? IN SUMMARY

People with asthma have especially sensitive airways. However, most people with asthma can greatly reduce or eliminate their symptoms through education about their disease, proper medical care, avoiding “triggers,” and using medications as prescribed.

For additional information about asthma, please contact the:

Pulmonary Function Department
Marquette General Hospital
(906) 225-3310 or
1-800-562-9753, ext. 3310

Additional health information is available through the MGH Health Information Center
(906) 225-4950
or 1-800-562-9753, ext. 4950

Revised—April—1996