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This information handout is provided for general medical knowledge only. It may or may not relate to your specific medical condition and it does not constitute individualized medical advice.

Asthma

Asthma is a very common condition of the lungs; about 25 million Americans experience it. During regular breathing with asthma, the passages within the lungs can become narrow and cause noisy breathing and shortness of breath. This condition can be brought on or worsened by activity, exercise, cold weather, or allergies. In fact, having allergies many times can go hand-in-hand with having asthma.

Your primary care physician should be very familiar with the signs and symptoms of asthma. The most important part of helping your doctor make a correct diagnosis is discussing your symptoms and how long they have been present. It is also important to talk about what makes your breathing symptoms better or worse, and when they occur.

What Are the Symptoms of Asthma?

Common symptoms of asthma include:

- Wheezing (high-pitched) sound when breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Cough
- Tightness in the chest
- Pain in the chest

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What Causes Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic condition that can run in families. In younger patients, asthma can be caused by allergies that develop into a chronic (long term) inflammation of the lungs. In adults, asthma can be seen in patients with sinusitis or nasal polyps. The exact cause is unknown but once someone has asthma, viruses like the common cold can trigger an asthma attack. Environmental irritants, like pollen, molds, animal dander, dust, strong odors, and tobacco smoke, can affect children or adults with asthma. During an asthma attack, it may be difficult to catch your breath, especially if you're very active. You may also feel tightness or pain in your chest. In asthmatics, these symptoms are reversible with medication.

What Are the Treatment Options?

Patients with asthma commonly go to their primary care physician or the emergency room with breathing issues. It's important to make sure that the cause of the breathing problem is actually asthma and not from another condition. Children or adults with asthma may end up seeing a lung specialist, or pulmonologist, to help control their symptoms. They may also be tested for allergies.

Special pulmonary function tests can be performed to check your lungs and how they respond to inhalers that help open the passages. A chest X-ray may also be ordered to check your lungs, heart, and air passages. Chest X-rays are common, quick, and use low doses of radiation.

Treatment for asthma is designed to decrease inflammation and swelling in the lung passages. Often, patients start with inhalers, which are handheld devices that puff medication into your lungs through your mouth. Different types of inhalers are used, such as ones containing steroids to decrease inflammation, or inhaled medications that work on the muscles that open the airways. Some of these inhalers are used daily, and some are used as "rescue" inhalers for quick relief.

When inhalers do not fully control symptoms, oral pills can be helpful. Pills work to decrease inflammation, fight infection, or help open the passages to the lungs. The use of inhalers and pills depend on how often breathing symptoms occur and how severe they are.

One of the most important parts of treating asthma is avoiding things that make asthma worsen. This includes avoiding pollen, staying out of cold air, and keeping the house clean and free of dust. Paying close attention to what triggers your breathing issues can help identify what makes your asthma worse. Take note of your symptoms and when they occur to help your doctor make an accurate diagnosis.

Finally, it's important to stay healthy and exercise, because conditions like being overweight and acid reflux can make asthma symptoms worse. Asthma as an adult or in your child can be a changing and challenging condition, and knowing about how to care for it is the best way to treat this condition.

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What Questions Should I Ask My Doctor?

1. Is asthma the cause of my breathing issues?
2. What types of tests do I need to receive an accurate diagnosis?
3. Do you recommend inhalers or medications for me? What are the potential side effects?
4. Will this affect my other medical conditions and/or current medications?
5. Do I have any restrictions to activities, exercises, or work?
6. Could I have sinusitis?
7. Should I see a specialist?