

Asthma

Fact Sheet for Patients and Parents

What is asthma?

- Asthma is a common breathing disorder affecting 6 million children in the US.
- Youngsters with asthma may have cough, chest discomfort, and repeated difficulties with breathing.
- Asthma should not stop you from being active. Jerome Bettis, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Amy Van Dyken are a few of many athletes who have asthma.

What causes asthma?

- A definitive single cause of asthma has not been established. A combination of factors may lead to asthma, including genetics, the environment, and one's immune system. Asthma tends to run in families.

What happens to the lungs during an asthma attack?

- When we breathe, air enters through the nose and then travels through the airways (breathing tubes) into our lungs. Asthma causes the small breathing tubes to become inflamed, narrow, and full of mucus. This makes it hard to push the air out of the lungs during breathing. Sometimes during an asthma attack one can hear a wheeze, a whistling noise when breathing out.

What do asthma medicines do?

- There are different types of asthma medicines. Some medicines relax the muscles in the breathing tubes letting the air move in and out more easily. Other medicines calm down the inflammation that makes the breathing tubes swollen and narrow.
- Some medicines must be taken everyday, others are taken only when there are signs of trouble.

What can I do to prevent problems with asthma?

- Everyone with asthma has things that make their asthma worse, these are called **triggers**. For each person, it is important to figure out what the triggers are and then avoid these triggers.
- **Colds are common triggers of asthma.** Frequent hand washing and washing of toys, are important ways to avoid getting colds or passing them to others.
- **Avoid things that can irritate the breathing tubes,** such as cigarette smoke, mold, cats/dogs, cockroaches, and dust.
- **Be alert for the signs of asthma trouble:** cough (especially cough at night or with exercise), chest discomfort, breathing fast, wheezing, and troubles sleeping at night. Know who to call at signs of trouble.
- **Make an asthma plan** with the primary care provider. Know what the medicines do, when to use them, and how to use them.
- **See the primary care provider** at least every 1-6 months to make sure that all is well and to continue to learn about ways to control your child's asthma.

Other Helpful Resources for Asthma:

Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network. www.foodallergy.org

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology. www.aaaai.org

One Minute Asthma: What You Need to Know, by Thomas F. Plaut MD, 2008

American Academy of Pediatrics. www.aap.org

Allergy & Asthma Network: Mother of Asthmatics. www.aanma.org

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