

HEALTHMART 2008

Asthma

Do these symptoms sound familiar to you? Wheezing, chest tightness, trouble breathing, coughing—especially at night or in the early morning? If so, you or someone you love may have asthma.

Asthma is a chronic disease of the airways—the tiny tubes that carry air into and out of your lungs. Ranging from mild to severe, asthma causes the walls of airways to become swollen, easily irritated, and sometimes filled with mucus. Airways narrow, blocking airflow. This can be life threatening. In fact, it's the culprit behind one out of every four trips to the emergency room each year!

Although no one knows its cause, asthma is likely linked to both your genes and environment. The most common chronic illness in children, asthma affects adults, too—a total of 20 million Americans altogether. It accounts for more than 10 billion dollars in health care costs each year. People who live in large urban areas are more at risk, as are African Americans, people who are obese, or those who had respiratory infections as a child.

After getting a diagnosis, one of the first things to do is find out what causes your symptoms. Allergens such as pollen, mold, or animal dander are common triggers. But a wide range of other factors can prompt asthma symptoms. Cigarettes, cold air, exercise, strong emotions, infections, or certain foods, chemicals or medications are a few examples.

Asthma isn't curable, but you can learn to manage it—with help. Allergists and immunologists are special doctors with expertise in treating asthma and allergies. See your doctor regularly, avoid your triggers (but stay active), and take prescribed medications to control your asthma or allergies. Your doctor may also suggest using a hand-held device called a peak flow meter. It shows how fast you can move air out of your lungs. This helps you manage your asthma by providing an early-warning system for asthma attacks.

Medications for asthma offer a two-pronged strategy. Long-acting medications control asthma over the long haul, helping to prevent full-fledged asthma attacks. Inhaled corticosteroids do this by reducing airway swelling. You take quick-relief medications at the first sign of symptoms—or right before exercise. Inhaled or taken by tablet, liquid, or injection, bronchodilators work by relaxing tightened muscles around airways. You may also take a type of fast-acting corticosteroid—either orally or by injection.

Sound confusing? I can walk you through it. I'll give you an overview of what to expect, including potential side effects and details about how to manage asthma while you're pregnant. I'll explain your options when a medication is being discontinued. That's the case with two common metered dose inhalers—Becotide and Becloforte—because they

contain chemicals that destroy the ozone layer of the atmosphere. You may need to make changes in other medications, too, if they interact poorly with your asthma medications.

How much have you learned? You can test yourself. Go online and take the Health Mart asthma quiz. Go to <http://healthmart.staywellsolutionsonline.com/> and click on “interactive tools,” and then “quizzes.”
