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Allergy & Asthma

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Estimates of the number of Americans coping with asthma vary—as of 2002, experts guess the number to be between 12 and 20 million. However, there is no debate about the devastating effects of this chronic condition. And asthma isn't the only respiratory condition encumbering the lives of Americans. It is speculated that two out of every ten Americans are currently dealing with allergies.

The good news for the majority of sufferers is that both allergies and asthma can be managed, limiting the number and intensity of attacks. By learning to recognize the symptoms and triggers, and through a treatment plan established with the help of a medical professional, most allergy and asthma sufferers can control the condition, making life enjoyable again.

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Asthma in Children

The American Lung Association estimates that more than six million children under the age of 18 suffer from asthma, with four million of them experiencing an attack within the last year.

In fact, asthma is the most common serious, chronic disease of childhood. Pediatric asthma sufferers account for more than three million doctor's office visits each year. Yet some parents simply aren't aware that their children are displaying symptoms of the disease. Often, this lack of awareness is because the symptoms are not always pronounced. For instance, it is possible for a child with asthma to suffer without a wheeze. And some chronic coughs that are assumed to be caused by the common cold are actually a result of airway inflammation resulting in tightening and constricting bronchial tubes caused by asthma.

Some evaluations – such as the Pulmonary Function Test – do exist to determine the health of a child's lungs. In most cases, however, diagnosis is made primarily through a combination of symptom detection and parental observation. Children who have less stamina than other children in the same age group or who miss school or lose sleep because of coughing and/or wheezing should be evaluated by a medical professional.

It is also important to note that second-hand smoke is a significant hazard to many children. It is estimated that from 200,000 to one million children suffer from a worsened asthmatic condition because of exposure to tobacco smoke.

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Occupational Asthma

Asthma sufferers whose symptoms seem to increase when they are at work and decrease when they away from the job may actually have a condition known as occupational asthma.

Occupational asthma can be a result of irritant or allergic reactions to items in the workplace or to other offending substances—known as triggers and allergens—in the immediate area. Symptoms are similar to those experienced by any other asthma sufferer: coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath and/or tightening in the chest. Workplace-related allergies can also appear as allergic reactions, such as watery, itchy eyes and a stuffy or runny nose.

The simplest way to treat occupational asthma is to avoid the triggers whenever possible. A medical professional such as an occupational medicine physician, primary care physician or a qualified allergist or immunologist can provide you with medical treatment to mitigate the effect of attacks and can formulate a plan to help prevent future episodes.

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What Are Allergies?

The environment and all the particles in it can affect every person differently, but for those with allergies, certain substances—called allergens—cause the immune system to overreact. While the allergens themselves are often harmless (pollen, for example), the reactions they cause can be serious.

Allergies are a result of the body's immune system working to defend itself against a foreign substance. To fight the allergen, the body produces a specific antibody to that allergen, which attaches itself to mast cells. The mast cells then explode when the attached antibody next comes into contact with that specific antigen, releasing chemicals into the body. These chemicals—one of which is histamine—create the visible reaction that allergy sufferers display.

Generally speaking, the type of allergen will determine where the allergic reaction presents itself. Airborne allergies will affect the eyes, nose and lungs, while ingested allergens will cause reactions in the mouth, throat, stomach and intestines. In rare cases, a systemic or body-wide reaction takes place in the form of hives, decreased blood pressure or shock.

Common allergens include pollen, dust mites, animal dander, insect stings, latex, mold and a variety of foods, such as milk, fish, nuts, wheat and eggs.

Reactions

Allergic reactions are categorized into three areas:

Mild Reactions

Generally these reactions are limited to a specific area of the body and are displayed through rashes or hives; eyes that itch and/or water; or congestion. These reactions rarely travel throughout the body.

Moderate Reactions

Symptoms are similar to those of mild reactions—itchy, watery eyes, congestion and rashes; however, moderate reactions tend to be systemic and can include itchiness over the entire body or labored breathing.

Severe Reactions

Also known as anaphylaxis, these rare reactions create life-threatening situations. The response is usually sudden, progressing rapidly from innocent symptoms (such as watery eyes) to critical ones (such as airway obstruction, choking, or unconsciousness). Anaphylaxis occurs throughout the entire body and often results in a

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sudden drop in blood pressure, dizziness and disorientation.

Treatment

Treatment of allergies varies based on the type of allergen and the character of response to the allergen. Treatment ranges from simply avoiding the allergen to specific medications to treat and control allergies. A more aggressive option is immunotherapy, a series of shots designed to desensitize a person to a specific allergen.

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What Is Asthma?

The general public rarely thinks of asthma as a critical condition. However, each year almost two million Americans visit the emergency room because of the disease, with almost 500,000 being admitted to the hospital and more than 5,000 people dying as a result of it.

Asthma is a chronic inflammation condition affecting airflow through the lungs. A large number of people suffer from asthma without their knowledge, due to the fact that many characteristics of an asthma attack mimic symptoms of other respiratory diseases and infections. Failure to diagnose the disease results in lack of treatment—which can be deadly.

What is an asthma attack?

The inflammation condition of asthma causes airways to be extra sensitive or hyper-responsive to certain triggers. Two different reactions occur during an asthma attack:

Inflammation

The main airways of the lungs—called the bronchial tubes—become swollen and irritated, causing narrowing of the air passage and reducing the amount of air that can travel to the lungs.

Constriction

The muscles of the bronchial tubes actually press together or tighten—called bronchoconstriction—making it more difficult to push air in and out of the lungs. It is also common for asthma sufferers to produce excessive mucus in their bronchial tubes.

These reactions can lead to wheezing, chest tightness or shortness of breath. Victims will often feel a tightening in their chest and will experience coughing fits.

Causes

While the exact cause of asthma is unknown, studies show asthma is more common in people with a family history of the condition, as well as in people with allergies or those regularly exposed to tobacco smoke. Common triggers for asthma include: colds, viruses, common allergens (pollen, mold, pet dander), tobacco smoke, exertion, climate changes and strong emotional reactions (stress, laughter, anxiety).

Treatment

Working with a medical professional is the best way to create a plan to control asthma and respond to attacks as needed. The focus is to prevent and avoid asthma problems. Because asthma is often worsened by specific “triggers” – situations or environmental conditions that set off undesirable reactions in the bronchial tubes –

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the simplest treatment includes knowing and managing these triggers to avoid an asthma attack in the first place. It is equally important to have a course of action in place for when an episode does take place, to ensure the safety of the sufferer.

In many cases medications are required to give asthma sufferers control over their lives. Medications vary based on the type of asthmatic reaction a person experiences, and can be administered orally, by inhalation or through injection. Common medicines include:

- Bronchodilators to relax the muscles of the airway and provide temporary relief from symptoms
- Anti-inflammatory medicines such as steroids or other medications with similar action that help to control and prevent asthma problems.
- Immunotherapy shots designed to reduce the body's sensitivity to certain triggers, significantly decreasing the likelihood of future attacks.

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