

Taking Control of Your Asthma

By Michael Netzel, MD

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Q. There is so much information and treatment options available for asthma these days. How do I know if I have asthma and how can I best manage it?

A. I recall a particular patient—a child who had asthma symptoms when younger—who was referred for evaluation in my office. Both the child and the parent denied any significant respiratory problems for over 5 years. However, testing revealed his lung function was only 75% of normal. This reduction was still reversible with treatment and now the child's lung function is maintained at normal levels. Further questioning revealed the child had reduced activities to avoid excessive exertion and was unable to keep up with peers at school prior to treatment. Asthmatics will adjust their activity levels to reduce discomfort and still perceive themselves as having no problems.

Understanding Asthma

Asthma is a disease that causes the airways in the lungs to become inflamed (red and swollen) which can lead to spasm or constriction of the airways. The airways can become so narrow that it makes breathing difficult or lead to the other symptoms of asthma. These flare-ups can occur with a variety of triggers such as cold air, physical activities, allergen exposures or infections, to name a few. Shortness of breath, chest tightness or pressure, coughing or wheezing are all symptoms of asthma that can be controlled with proper therapy.

Asthma and Children

Asthma can occur at any age but can be particularly distressing when it occurs in your child. It is the most common chronic disease of childhood. Although asthma symptoms may decrease as the airways enlarge during periods of rapid childhood growth (especially puberty), the underlying disease process does not go away and symptoms may recur at any time.

Asthma Control

There is no cure for asthma, but it can be controlled and monitored. It may take some effort, but once controlled you should be able to participate in sports or other activities, sleep through the night, not miss work or school and reduce ER visits.

The goal of asthma therapy is to reduce symptoms and allow a normal lifestyle but also to improve baseline lung function and reduce the chances for severe reactions. Untreated asthma can lead to permanent lung injury and irreversible respiratory symptoms. Children and adults with untreated asthma may not know how poor their breathing really is as they "get used to" their lower lung capacity. They may not perceive discomfort until their respiratory function is severely reduced and life threatening.

Asthma is categorized as mild, moderate or severe. However, even mild asthmatics can have severe life-threatening attacks. Therapy is based on the severity of asthma and the symptoms experienced by the patient. Many current asthma medications have been proven to be very safe and effective in all age groups. Alternative treatments that

reduce the perception of asthma are also available but do not address the underlying lung function or inflammation and may place the asthma patient at risk for a severe life-threatening attack.

Please discuss with your primary care provider or asthma specialist what medications or alternative treatments may be appropriate for you or your child.

ABOUT DR. NETZEL:

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