

Asthma Attacks

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AN ASTHMA ATTACK

Doctors are not exactly certain how you get asthma. But they do know that once you have it, your lungs and overreact to things that can start an asthma attack.

For instance, when you have asthma, you might get an asthma attack when you have a cold (or some other kind of respiratory infection). Or, you might get an attack when you breathe something that bothers your lungs (such as cigarette smoke, dust or feathers).

When this happens, three changes take place in your lungs:

Cells in your air tubes make more mucus than normal. This mucus is very thick and sticky. It tends to clog up the tubes.

The air tubes tend to swell, just as skin swells when you get a scrape.

The muscles in your air tubes tighten.

These changes cause the air tubes to narrow. This makes it hard to breathe.

Asthma attacks may start suddenly. Or they may take a long time, even days, to develop. Attack can be severe, moderate or mild.

SEVERE ATTACKS

When these happen, you may become breathless. As you're less and less able to breathe, you may have trouble talking. Your neck muscles may become tight as you breathe. Your lips and fingernails might have a grayish or bluish color. The skin around the ribs of your chest might be sucked in. This happens most often in children. If you are using a peak flow meter

you will drop below 50% of your personal best.

In the case of a severe asthma attack:

- Take your asthma medicine prescribed for an attack and get emergency medical help right away!
- You can get into trouble if you wait too long to get help. This is how people die from asthma.
- Go quickly to your doctor's office or an emergency room. The sooner you see doctor, the faster you get the help you need.

MODERATE AND MILD ATTACKS

These attacks are more common. You may start to feel tight in your chest. You might start coughing or spit up mucus. You may feel restless or have trouble sleeping. You might make a wheezing or whistling sound when you breathe. This can happen as you breathe air in and out of your narrowed air tubes.

What should you do in the case of a moderate or mild asthma attack? Take your asthma medicine prescribed for an attack. Usually then the air tubes in your lungs open up in minutes. Sometimes, though, it can take several hours. Ask your doctor how long it takes for the medicine to work.

If your medicine does not work in the time it is supposed to, call your doctor.

THE SECOND WAVE

In some cases, your asthma attack may seem to ease up. But, changes may take place in your air tubes that cause another attack or second wave. This can be more severe and more dangerous than the first attack. In the second wave, the air tubes continue to swell. This may happen even when you're not having asthma symptoms. At this time, you might find it harder to breathe.

The second wave may last for days or even weeks after the first attack. Your lungs become more sensitive to other irritants. This can trigger more attacks.

During the second wave, you may have to be admitted

to a hospital. Doctors need to take care of your asthma and give you medicines that will reduce the swelling in your air tubes and relax the tightened muscles.

In any kind of asthma attack:

- Don't take cough medicine. This will not help your asthma.
- Take only the asthma medicines that the doctor gives you.