

Asthma

Asthma is common, affecting more than 1 in 10 children and 1 in 20 adults. The typical symptoms of untreated asthma are wheeze, cough, chest tightness and shortness of breath. The severity of symptoms vary from person to person and from time to time.

Asthma is caused by inflammation in the airways, which irritates the muscle in the walls of the airways causing them to narrow. This makes it more difficult to breathe and is aggravated further by the inflammation causing the lining of the airways to produce more, extra sticky mucus.

Flare-ups of asthma happen for a variety of reasons. Some of these flare-ups are triggered by colds or cigarette smoke or exercise or emotion, but others just seem to appear for no apparent reason or obvious trigger.

People with asthma shouldn't smoke. If you do and would like to give up make an appointment with the nurse and she can help you. Passive smoking can trigger asthma attacks and children with asthma should live in a smoke free home. Again, if you need help, speak to us. Most smokers take several attempts to give up before finally succeeding, so if you have tried and failed in the past, don't worry, this may be the time you succeed.

House dust mite can be an important trigger for some people with asthma. If you are struggling with your asthma, you may wish to discuss with nurse whether this could be part of your problem and what steps might be helpful in reducing the level of mites in your home.

Most people with asthma are treated with inhalers. It is important to be confident that you are using them effectively and nurse can give you advice & training or perhaps a "spacer" to help you make the most of your inhaler. Some people have got so used to their asthma symptoms they have forgotten what it is like to be symptom free. A cough during the night is probably the commonest symptom people learn to tolerate. This is most often seen in smokers who tend to use or over-use their reliever inhaler, because it gives them quick but temporary relief, and ignore or

under-use their preventer inhaler. Symptoms can be prevented altogether working with nurse.

If you haven't seen the asthma nurse in a while and you have symptoms or you have to use your reliever inhaler most days then you could be feeling a lot better soon after a visit to the asthma clinic.

A normal treatment plan worked out with the help of nurse would include, a preventer inhaler (usually a steroid) to take on a regular basis, a reliever inhaler (usually salbutamol or terbutaline) to be used only occasionally when symptoms "breakthrough". Some people with asthma that is a bit more difficult to control may need an additional long-acting reliever or an inhaler with a combination of preventer and long-acting reliever. Nurse is likely to work out a written plan for you to take home with you, to help you manage any flare-ups yourself and if appropriate you may be given a starter course of steroids tablets with instructions on when these should be taken. You are likely to be shown how to measure your own peak-flow and given a meter to take home so that you can monitor your asthma, and be confident when you need to alter your medication or seek advice.

Asthma can be an emergency and you or your child may need urgent treatment if your inhalers do not relieve your symptoms, but especially if you are very breathless and have difficulty talking due to your shortness of breath.

All people with asthma should have an annual flu-jab.

Some useful web-addresses

National Asthma Campaign
www.asthma.org.uk

Some useful telephone numbers

Asthma Helpline 0845 7010203