

Patient information from BMJ

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Asthma in adults: what is it?

Most adults with asthma have had it since childhood, although some people do get asthma later in life. With the right treatment it can usually be controlled well.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a condition that can make it hard to breathe. It happens when the walls of the tiny air passages in your lungs get swollen or inflamed. This makes it harder for air to get in and out.

Like an allergy, asthma can be triggered by substances in the air. Common triggers include house dust mites, pollen, and animal fur. Other things that can cause asthma symptoms include tobacco smoke, air pollution, fumes from chemicals (such as bleach), exercise, and colds and chest infections.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of asthma can include feeling short of breath and needing to gasp for air, or you may get a tightness in your chest and wheezing when you breathe. You may also get a cough.

You will probably find that your symptoms change from one day to the next. They may get worse at night. You may also have periods when you are free of symptoms.

Sometimes your symptoms may become very severe. If you feel your asthma is getting out of control very quickly and your usual treatments aren't working, you should see your doctor or seek emergency treatment straight away.

What will happen to me?

Treatments for asthma work well. If you follow your treatment plan and have regular check-ups with your doctor, you should be able to live a full and active life.

For more background information on treatments for asthma see our leaflet *Asthma in adults: what treatments work?*

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