**What is asthma?**

**Asthma**

Asthma is a disease of the lungs. The airways of people who have asthma are extra sensitive to the things they're allergic to (called allergens) and to other irritating things in the air (called irritants). Asthma symptoms start when allergens or other irritants cause the lining of the airways to become inflamed (swollen) and narrow. The muscles around the airways can then spasm (contract rapidly), causing the airways to narrow even more. When the lining of the airways is inflamed, it produces more mucus. The mucus clogs the airways and further blocks the flow of air. This is called an "asthma attack." Asthma attacks can be mild, moderate or severe. Symptoms of an asthma attack include the following: Coughing, Feeling, Breathless, Tightness in the chest, Wheezing (breathing that makes a hoarse, squeaky, musical or whistling sound), cough with mucus, difficulty breathing and talking, trouble sleeping.

**Signs of an emergency**

Call your doctor or seek emergency care right away if you experience any of the following symptoms:

 •Your rescue medicine doesn't relieve your symptoms.

 •Your peak flow keeps dropping after treatment or falls below 50% of your best.

 •Your fingernails or lips turn gray or blue.

 •You have trouble walking or talking.

 •You have extreme difficulty breathing.

 •Your neck, chest or ribs are pulled in with each breath.

 •Your nostrils flare when you breathe.

 •Your heartbeat or pulse is very fast

**How can I tell if my asthma is getting worse?**

Signs that your asthma is getting worse include having symptoms at night, a drop in your peak flow and the need to use your rescue medicine more often. Talk to your doctor if you think that your asthma is getting worse. Treatment of your symptoms involves avoiding things that cause asthma attacks, keeping track of your symptoms and taking medicine.

**What medicines are used to treat asthma?**

Asthma medicines can generally be divided into two groups: medicines to prevent attacks (controller medicines) and medicines to treat attacks (sometimes called rescue medicines). Your doctor will talk to you about these medicines and what to do if you have an asthma attack. Ask your doctor for written instructions about how to take your medicines.

**Is there anything I can do to help avoid asthma attacks?**

You can help avoid asthma attacks by avoiding the triggers (also called allergens) and irritants that can start an asthma attack. Common triggers and irritants include: air pollution, dust, mold, pollen, tobacco smoke, pet dander, exercise, changes in temperature, certain foods, sulfite (food preservative in red wine, beer, salad bars, dehydrated soups, and other foods), aspirin, or ibuprofen (brand names: Advil, Motrin, Nuprin), heartburn, sinus infections, strong emotions (such as crying or laughing), perfume, spray-on deodorants, and viruses. If you and your doctor figure out which things bother your asthma, you can start trying to address them.

**How do I avoid common asthma triggers?**

If pollen and mold cause your symptoms, use your air conditioner and try to keep the windows of your home and car closed. Change the filter on your heating and cooling system frequently. To keep mold down, clean and air out bathrooms, kitchens and basements often. Use an air conditioner or dehumidifier to keep the level of humidity less than 50%. People who are allergic to dust are actually allergic to the droppings of dust mites. To reduce dust mites in your home, wash bed sheets weekly in hot water (above 130°F). Cover mattresses and pillows in airtight covers, and remove carpets and drapes. If you must have carpet, you can treat it with chemicals to help reduce dust mites. Try to avoid stuffed animals, dried flowers and other things that trap dust. Pets can cause problems if you are allergic to them. If you have a pet, keep it out of your bedroom. Don't allow smoking in your house or car. Tobacco smoke can make asthma worse.