

## **Asthma: Stopping Attacks Before They Start**

The scene will be all too familiar to an asthma sufferer. A strange, uncomfortable tickle begins in the chest. Then comes the first cough, and after that the first wheeze. Soon, the victim is gasping for breath, struggling to expel an excess of air that is trapped inside the lungs.

The description is of an asthma attack, or *bronchospasm*, as it is technically known. The World Health Organization has identified asthma as one of the most rapidly increasing diseases in the world. In the last two decades, the number of asthmatics worldwide rose 102 percent. At present, 150 million people suffer from the disease, and more than 180,000 die of asthma each year. The fastest rise has been among children.

### **Triggers of Asthma**

Asthma operates by making the small airways of the lungs overly sensitive to factors that would not harm normal lungs. Something as seemingly innocent as a sudden gust of cold air can trigger bronchospasm in the lungs of an asthmatic. Other triggers include environmental factors, such as pollen or dust, and irritants, such as aerosol sprays and tobacco smoke. Abrupt weather changes, exercise, emotional stress, and colds are yet other potential triggers.

Not all of these triggers affect all asthmatics equally. Some asthmatics are more sensitive to dust, others to chemicals. Identifying specific triggers, as you will see shortly, can lessen the frequency and severity of attacks.

### **Treating Asthma with Medicine**

Luckily for the growing population of asthmatics, bold strides have been made on the research front, leading to new and more effective medications that can stop attacks before they start. Among these are mouth inhalers containing either a steroid compound or the drug sodium cromolyn. Both medications have been proven effective at preventing the linings of the lungs from swelling shut in the presence of triggers.

In order for these inhalers to do their job, however, the asthmatic must learn proper use of them. Suitable uses include correct breathing during inhalation and never missing a daily dose. Most important of all, asthmatics should *never* use these long-term preventive sprays during an attack. Under such conditions, the medications can actually do more harm than good.

### **Treating Asthma with Common Sense.**

Besides consultation with a health professional, asthmatics can take steps of their own by reducing exposure to known triggers.

- Having a family member seal mattresses in dust-proof enclosures can help eliminate dust.
- Keeping furry pets out of the bedroom (or removing the pets from the home) can help asthmatics sensitive to the “dander” in pet fur.

In addition to these do’s, several don’ts should be heeded in homes where an asthmatic lives. The person responsible for house cleaning should not use room deodorizers, especially if the asthmatic has a chemical sensitivity. Above all else, tobacco smoking should be banned in the home, not only for the sake of the asthmatic, but also for all family members.