What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic disease involving inflammation of the airways that makes breathing difficult. Common symptoms include shortness of breath, tightness of the chest, wheezing and coughing. During an asthma episode, the person gasps for breath as the airways from the lungs become constricted and the passages inflamed and clogged with thick, sticky mucus. 80% of life-threatening asthma episodes occur at night.

While asthma cannot be cured, it can be controlled. This brochure will give you life saving information about warning signs, what triggers episodes, how to control asthma, and where to get help in Contra Costa County.

Who has Asthma?

Anyone can have it. The number of reported asthma cases is rising, and in the United States, African Americans, children and women have shown the most dramatic increases. Children are at risk. An estimated 14.6 million Americans suffer from asthma, and 4.8 million are under the age of 18. It is the leading chronic disease of childhood, and the leading cause of school absenteeism attributed to chronic conditions.

African Americans are at risk. In the age groups birth to four and 15 to 24, African Americans are six times more likely to die of asthma than Whites.

Asian, Latino and other ethnic groups show slightly higher incidences than Whites.

Medical Care

In case of a medical emergency call 911. If you already have a doctor, contact him or her if you are worried that your child may have asthma. If you think your child may have asthma and you want to see a medical provider but don’t have health insurance, call Contra Costa Health Services for an appointment at 1-800-495-8885. If you are a member of Kaiser Health Plan call, Kaiser Permanente Hospital: 1-800-33-ASK-ME (1-800-332-7563) Website: www.kaiserpermanente.org If you are a Contra Costa Health Plan member and your child needs medical assistance, call the Asthma Care Manager at (925) 313-6651.

Community Clinics

Community clinics offer medical assistance and health education for people of all income levels with asthma. Brookeside Community Health Center: (510) 215-9092 La Clinica de La Raza: (925) 431-1259 Website: www.laclinica.org

Asthma Information Resources

† Community Action to Fight Asthma: provides advocacy and environmental policy action through a coalition that addresses asthma in West Contra Costa County. Community advocates provide outreach and education about reducing asthma and asthma triggers (West County only). For more information call: (925) 313-6764.

† Contra Costa County Asthma Coalition: provides advocacy and policy action to address issues surrounding asthma for all of Contra Costa. For more information call: (925) 313-6905.

† Tobacco Prevention Project: For information on tobacco ordinances and smoking cessation please call: (925) 313-6214.

† Hazardous Materials Ombudsman: For questions regarding environmental issues or chemical releases please call: 1-877-662-8376.

Regional Asthma Management and Prevention Initiative: (510) 622-4438. Website: www.rampasthma.org

American Lung Association: 1-800-LUNG-USA (1-800-586-4872). Website: www.lungusa.org

Environmental Protection Agency: Environmental Information Center 1-866-EPA-WEST. Website: www.epa.gov

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America: 1-800-727-8462

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Asthma Warning Signs

**Children and Adults Look For:**

- **Wheezing** – a high-pitched, whistling sound when breathing out (exhaling).
- **Coughing** – an unproductive cough (it doesn’t clear mucus from the throat) that lasts more than four weeks. Coughing at night. A funny little cough that sounds as if you’re clearing your throat.
- **Shortness of Breath** – feeling as if you can’t breathe in as much air as you need. Panting heavily after exercise.
- **Excess Mucus** – airways are clogged by large amounts of thick mucus, which restricts breathing.
- **Chest Tightness** – chest feels as if it’s been wrapped tightly. It’s difficult to catch a full breath.
- **Fatigue** – tiring quickly, which can be caused by symptoms themselves, or because symptoms are interfering with sleep.
- **Breathy Speech** – inability to speak loudly or in full sentences.

**In Infants and Small Children Look For:**

- Rapid, noisy breathing
- Chest congestion, tightness
- Wheezing during a respiratory illness
- Coughing after running or crying, especially at night
- Sucked-in looking chest (between ribs, and at front of neck; a bare breast bone)
- Frequent respiratory infections such as pneumonia and bronchitis
- Shortness of breath

If you or your child has any of these symptoms, see your health care professional for an examination and diagnosis.

What Triggers Asthma Episodes?

Different things can trigger asthma episodes in different people. These “irritants” and “allergens” may not cause an immediate episode, but they build up in the system, and when there are enough, one of them will “trigger” an episode. Common triggers to watch for are:

**Allergens**

- **Pollens** – most often in springtime, and worst between 5:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.
- **Outdoor Molds** – most plentiful in autumn
- **Dust Mites** – found in bedding, upholstery, rugs, drapes. Thrive in humid environments
- **Pets & Other Animals (Including Rodents)** – their fur or feathers, saliva and urine can all be triggers
- **Cockroaches & Their Droppings**
- **Indoor Molds** – most common in bathrooms, basements, other damp areas of the house, and houseplants
- **Housecleaning** – can stir up dust, and cleaning products can be triggers

**Irritants**

- **Perfumes** – in soaps, cleaning products and laundry detergent, cosmetics and hair products
- **Air Pollution**
- **Tobacco Smoke**
- **Wet paint, glues and solvents**
- **Fumes & Smoke** – from gas, wood and kerosene stoves, heaters, & fireplaces

**Other Things That Can Be Triggers:**

- **Colds & Viruses**
- **Cold weather**
- **Forms of physical and mental stress**
- **Exercise**

Managing Asthma

**The Good News: Asthma Can Be Controlled!**

People with asthma can control it and live a healthy, active life.

Your health care provider will help you develop an Asthma Action Plan which will help you control your asthma and know what to do if you have an asthma episode. Using your plan will help you:

- **Be Active** in exercise and sports without symptoms
- **Sleep** through the night without symptoms
- **Prevent** asthma episodes

**Have the Best Possible Peak Flow Number** (lungs that work well)

**Avoid** side effects from medicines

**Asthma Action Plan**

Your health care provider will show you how to use a peak flow meter to test the strength of flow of air through your passages, how to read the results (flow numbers) and what to do when the readings are in different zones (degrees of seriousness).

You may also have medication to take based on your flow numbers.

Your health care provider will help you identify your allergies and other triggers and learn how to avoid them. You can develop a Trigger Control Plan to help you avoid triggers, which can bring on an episode.

Keep open lines of communication about your asthma action plan with:

Your family, workplace/child’s school and daycare, and health care providers.