

Asthma

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that causes episodes of wheezing, breathlessness, tightness in the chest, or coughing. After the age of 15, asthma is more common in girls and women than in boys and men. Women with asthma may have more asthma symptoms during certain times in the menstrual cycle. Asthma can also cause problems during pregnancy. You can help prevent or stop asthma attacks with medicine and by staying away from your asthma triggers.

Q: How does asthma affect women?

A: Compared to men with asthma, women with asthma go to the hospital for asthma treatment more often, use more quick-relief or “rescue” medicines, and report more trouble sleeping and more anxiety.

Changing hormone levels throughout the menstrual cycle and during pregnancy and menopause may affect airways in women with asthma.

Changing hormone levels throughout your menstrual cycle may also make your asthma symptoms worse during some parts of the cycle. For some women, asthma symptoms do not change after menopause. However, other women report that their asthma symptoms get better after menopause.

Q: How does asthma affect pregnancy?

A: Asthma can cause problems for you and your baby during pregnancy because of changing hormone levels. Asthma attacks during pregnancy can prevent your unborn baby from getting enough oxygen.

Pregnant women with asthma have a higher risk for:

- Preeclampsia
- Gestational diabetes
- Problems with the placenta, including placental abruption

- Premature birth (babies born before 37 weeks of pregnancy)
- Low birth weight baby (less than 5 and a half pounds)
- Cesarean section (C-section)
- Serious bleeding after childbirth (called postpartum hemorrhage)

Some asthma medicines may be safe to take during pregnancy.

Q: How is asthma treated?

A: Asthma is a chronic disease. It can be treated but not cured. You can take steps to manage asthma so that symptoms do not happen again or happen rarely by:

- Working with your doctor or nurse to set up and follow a personal asthma action plan
- Taking medicines as your doctor or nurse prescribes them for you
- Staying away from your asthma triggers
- Getting a flu shot. The flu can be very dangerous for women with asthma.

Q: How can I prevent an asthma attack?

A: You can take medicines to help prevent and stop asthma attacks. You can also help prevent attacks by taking these steps to avoid asthma triggers:

- **Monitor the air quality, mold, and pollen counts.** Use air conditioning or stay inside when pollen is high or air quality is bad.

- **Ask your doctor about taking medicine right before you exercise.** Fatigue, wheezing, and coughing brought on by exercise can be signs of asthma that is not controlled.
- **Don't use household products with chemical irritants.** Try “fragrance-free” products if fragrances trigger your asthma.
- **Keep cockroaches away.** Use traps or bait, not sprays, to kill cockroaches.
- **Vacuum once a week.** If you can, use a vacuum with a HEPA (high-efficiency particulate air) filter.
- **Stay away from pet dander.** Keep pets out of your bedroom and regularly vacuum areas where they spend time.
- **Don't smoke.** Don't allow anyone to smoke inside your home or car.
- **Use the exhaust fan when cooking** to move away dangerous gasses created by burning wood, natural gas, and kerosene.
- **Wash off allergens or pollutants.** Shower after going outside, and wash bedding in hot water regularly to kill dust mites.

For more information...

For more information about asthma, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HHS

1-800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/asthma

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

202-564-4700 • www.epa.gov/asthma

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), NIH, HHS

301-592-8573 • www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/asthma

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS

1-866-284-4107 • www.niaid.nih.gov/diseases-conditions/asthma

American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

414-272-6071 • www.aaaai.org

American Lung Association

1-800-586-4872 • www.lungusa.org

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