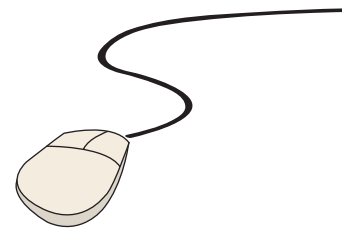


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A Look at Common Medical Issues on the Web

Asthma

By Adriana Modica, BSc

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that affects over 2 million Canadians.¹ The most common symptoms of the disease are wheezing, cough, shortness of breath, and chest tightness.

The causes of asthma are not fully understood. Some factors involved are smoking, genetics, allergies, and certain medications which potentiate asthma symptoms (*i.e.*, blood pressure and heart drugs, acetylsalicylic acid, sleeping pills).

Fortunately, most people with asthma can be successfully treated with a variety of medications. Options include: **inhaled bronchodilators**, which are very effective and produce few side-effects; **anti-inflammatories**, which are recommended for use in children; **systemic bronchodilators**, which are effective, but associated with more side-effects; **systemic corticosteroids**, which are limited to severe episodes; **inhaled medication delivery systems**, which are often misused; and **leukotriene modifiers**, a new class of oral anti-inflammatory asthma drug.

Reference
1. www.statscan.ca

Dan's case

Dan, 23, presents to the emergency department with persistent shortness of breath and wheezing. He had been in a perfectly healthy state until he developed wheezing while at work the day before. He tried using an over-the-counter asthma medication, but got no relief. He has also had difficulty sleeping because of his cough and intermittent wheezing.

Dan has no previous history of asthma, allergies, or atopy. He has been in generally good health. He smokes one pack of cigarettes per day. He does not drink alcohol, but consumes two cups of coffee per day. He denies use of any illicit drugs. He has never had any symptoms of hay fever.

Modified from: www.aoec.org/CEEM/methods/maryland5.html

Some common myths held by patients


Myth #1: Asthma only affects young people.

What to tell your patients: Although asthma is most common in childhood, it can actually develop at any age. In older people, it can be more difficult to determine whether attacks of wheezing and shortness of breath are actually caused by asthma or other lung diseases with similar symptoms (*i.e.*, bronchitis or emphysema).

Myth #2: "Can I use drugstore remedies?"

What to tell your patients: No! Over-the-counter products may help a little, but asthma should be treated by a physician, as patients require individualized regimens.

Myth #3: "I can't die from asthma."

What to tell your patients: With proper treatment, people with asthma can live normal, productive lives. However, without treatment, asthma can be extremely dangerous, even fatal. In Canada, approximately 20 children and 500 adults die each year from asthma. 

Surf your way to...

1. The Canadian Lung Association: www.lung.ca
2. The Asthma Society of Canada: www.asthma.ca
3. The American Lung Association: www.lungusa.org
4. The American Academy of Allergy Asthma & Immunology: www.aaaai.org