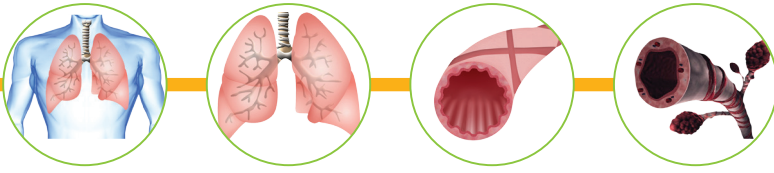
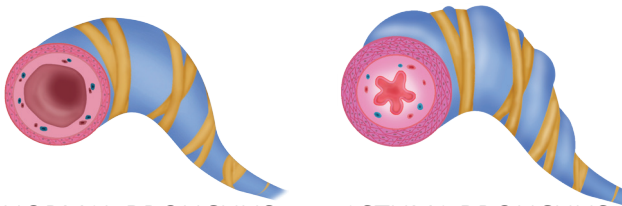


WHAT IS ASTHMA



Asthma is a long term illness of the lungs that causes the tubes that carry air into and out of the lungs (airways) to become swollen (inflamed) and produce lots of thick mucus.

In a person with asthma, the lung swelling (inflammation) makes the airways “twitchy”; this means they close easily with certain things like viral infections, cold air, allergens, exercise, and smoke.



NORMAL BRONCHUS

ASTHMA BRONCHUS

This makes the already clogged airways even narrower and can “trigger,” or bring on, asthma symptoms including coughing, whistling noise from the chest (wheezing) and shortness of breath.

People with asthma often find that their symptoms come and go. When the symptoms are present, it’s known as a flare, flare-up, episode, exacerbation, or attack. But even between attacks the airways are swollen because of the allergic inflammation that is present (see what is an allergy).

What Causes Asthma?

The exact cause of asthma isn’t known. Genetic and environmental factors combine to cause asthma, most often early in life. These factors include:



- An inherited tendency to develop allergies, called atopy (pronounced ate-o-pee) (see what is an allergy)

- Parents who have asthma



- Parents who smoke during pregnancy and after childbirth

- Certain respiratory infections during childhood
- Contact with allergens or exposure to virus infections early in life when the immune system is developing

WHAT IS ASTHMA

Who Is at Risk for Asthma?

Asthma affects people of all ages, but it most often starts during childhood. In South Africa approximately 20 % of children and 10% of adults have asthma. Asthma is the commonest chronic disease of childhood.

Young children who have wheezing symptoms often, with virus infections and also without virus infections are the most likely to have asthma that continues beyond 6 years of age. The other risk factors include having allergies, eczema (see what is eczema), or parents who have asthma.

Among children, more boys have asthma than girls. But among adults, more women have the disease than men! It's not clear whether or how sex and sex hormones play a role in causing asthma.

Most, but not all, people who have asthma have allergies.

Some people develop asthma because of contact with chemicals or dusts in their workplace. This type of asthma is called occupational asthma.

How Can Asthma Be Cured?

You can't cure asthma. However, you can take steps to control the disease and prevent its symptoms.

For example:

- Learn about your asthma and ways to control it.
- Follow your written asthma action plan
- Use medicines as your doctor prescribes.
- Identify and try to avoid things that make your asthma worse
- Keep track of your asthma symptoms and level of control.
- Get regular check-ups for your asthma.



A medical specialist with a special interest and skill in allergy might be able to help. See the list of health professionals with skills in allergy on the AFSA website.