
Section 3

How is
Asthma
diagnosed?

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Your doctor diagnoses or decides if you have asthma. The most important part of establishing a diagnosis of asthma is your health history or the story of how you have been feeling. This includes knowing if anyone in your family has had asthma or allergies. Asthma can be passed down in families. However, some people develop asthma without a family history of it. Why asthma develops is unknown. Most scientists think that there are probably several factors that cause it. Factors include environmental exposure to triggers and a family history (genetic predisposition).

Medical History

Give your doctor as much information as possible. During the medical history, the doctor will ask you a series of questions. Be sure to tell your doctor about the symptoms that you may be experiencing. Examples of symptoms are coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and problems breathing during activity and during the night. You will also be asked what makes symptoms worse. You will be asked how often symptoms occur. If you take medicine for these symptoms, either from the drug store or from another doctor, let your doctor know. It is also important to mention if you have ever been to the emergency room or hospitalized for breathing problems.

Tell the doctor if you have ever had coughing, itching, swelling, or other reactions to foods, insect stings, or medicine such as penicillin, aspirin, or other medicines. Tell your doctor if you have had allergies in the past, or have them now. Allergies can bring on asthma attacks. Some other symptoms of allergies are itchy, watery, red eyes; itchy or sore throat; runny, itchy nose; or nasal stuffiness. It is important if these symptoms seem to last longer than just one to two weeks.

Physical Exam

The doctor will closely examine your chest and breathing pattern. Wheezing may or may not be present during your physical exam. Some asthmatics do not experience wheezing. The doctor will also check for symptoms of allergies. Be sure to tell your doctor if you have had itchy, red, raised patches of skin. This may indicate a skin rash called eczema. Eczema is often related to asthma.

Lung (or Pulmonary) Function Tests

There are several types of lung function tests. The most informative and clinically useful tests are spirometry and peak expiratory flow measurements (PEF). Spirometry is performed in the hospital or clinic setting. Peak expiratory flow meters are used at home.

What is Spirometry?

Spirometry measures your breathing ability and your lung capacity (the maximum amount of air you can breathe in or out). It also measures how much air you can breathe out forcefully in one second. Your results indicate if your breathing is normal, or affected by asthma. Spirometry is performed with a computer.

You may be asked to use a bronchodilator (albuterol inhaler) during the test to open up your lungs. If you respond well to the medication, and your breathing becomes better, this may be a sign that you have asthma.

What is a normal test?

Each person has an expected “normal” lung capacity number or value. This value is based on a person’s age, height, and sex. If your lung capacity is less than 80% of the predicted value, this is considered abnormal. Your doctor will give you the results of the test, and explain if you may need to take medication, avoid certain things, and make changes in your lifestyle to help you to breathe better.

How is spirometry used?

Spirometry provides an accurate measurement of the presence and severity of asthma. It also shows how much better you can breathe after taking medication to open your lungs.

What is peak expiratory flow (PEF) measurement?

PEF is a measurement of the condition of your lungs. It is found through the use of a peak flow meter. PEF measures if your airways are open as usual, or if they are becoming smaller. Your doctor will help you determine your personal best peak flow. If your peak flow begins to drop, it means that you may soon begin to have asthma symptoms. If your peak flow drops to less than 50% of your personal best this is serious. It is a signal to call your doctor, or to get immediate medical attention. More information on measuring your peak flow is found on page 25.