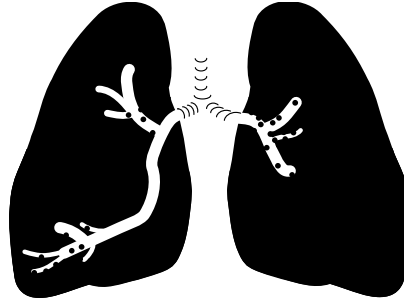


What is Asthma?

Asthma (noun): A respiratory condition marked by attacks of spasm in the bronchi of the lungs, causing difficulty in breathing and usually associated with allergic reaction. (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Tenth Edition.)



Take a look at the picture above. The trachea is the single tube at the top of the lungs. It splits into two tubes—one for each lung—that are called bronchi (the singular is bronchus). Each bronchus splits into smaller tubes called bronchioles. Asthma primarily happens in the bronchi.

The problem with Oxford's definition of asthma is that it leaves out something very important: Asthma is not something that just happens once in a while; it's always there.

The current research says that there are two primary causes for asthma symptoms; inflammation and muscle spasm (also called bronchoconstriction). Inflammation is irritation; the lining of the bronchi is always a bit irritated, or tends to get that way very easily. When the lining gets irritated, it swells, making the bronchi narrower; less air can get through. The irritated lining also produces mucus, which takes up more space and lets even less air through. Irritation on the inside of the bronchi also causes the muscles on the outside of the bronchi to spasm, making the bronchi even smaller still. The research says that the narrowed bronchi limit the amount of stale air going *out*, but any asthmatic will tell you that breathing *in* is the problem. In reality, it's both: The stale air can't get out, and it takes up the empty space that normally lets fresh air come in.

To treat asthma, we have to treat both causes (inflammation and muscle spasm). Some asthma medicines are meant to be used every day, and some are meant to be used only when you need them. Check with your doctor and make sure you know when and how often you are supposed to use the medicine that is prescribed for you.

Allergies can be part of the reason for asthma; asthma symptoms can be a kind of allergic reaction. However, allergies aren't always to blame. There are things that are irritating to everyone's lungs, even if they don't have asthma; but if you do have

asthma, the irritation is much worse. Things in the air like air fresheners, perfumes, pollution, smoke, and strong smells are irritants, and may make your asthma symptoms worse.

Asthma is always there, but there are things that you can do to reduce its impact on your life. Check with your doctor to find out how.