



## **WHAT IS ASTHMA**

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that lasts a long time. It cannot be cured-only controlled.

- Airways are inflamed. That is, airway linings are swollen.
- Airways narrow and breathing becomes difficult. This narrowing gets better (but not all the way in some patients), sometimes by itself, sometimes with treatment.
- Airways are super sensitive. They react to many things, such as cigarette smoke, pollen, or cold air. Coughing, wheezing, tight chest, difficult breathing, or an asthma episode may result. A more complete list of things that can cause some people's airways to react is given later (see, "What Causes Asthma Episodes").

### **What Are the Symptoms of Asthma?**

The main symptoms of asthma are:

- Shortness of breath.
- Wheezing
- Tightness in the chest.
- Cough lasting more than a week.

Not all people with asthma wheeze. For some, coughing may be the only symptoms of asthma. Coughing often occurs during the night or after exercise.

It's important to know that treatment can reverse asthma symptoms and it's important to treat even mild symptoms of asthma so that you can keep the symptoms from getting worse.

### **Normal Breathing**

When you breathe in, air is taken in through the nose and mouth. It goes down your windpipe, through your airways, and into the air sacs. When you breathe out, stale air leaves the lungs in the reverse order.

### **What Happens During an Episode of Asthma?**

Asthma affects the airways in your lungs. During an episode of asthma:

- The lining of the airways becomes swollen (inflamed).
- The airways produce a thick mucus.
- The muscles around the airways tighten and make the airways narrower.

These changes in the airways block the flow of air, making it hard to breathe.

You need to know the ways that asthma affects the airways so you can understand why it often takes more than one medicine to treat the disease. Very simply, some medicines relax the airways and others reduce (and even prevent) the swelling and mucus.