

Keeping your health and well-being in the know

MyHealth TALK

May 2010



MAY | Asthma Awareness Month

Mark Your Calendar May 19, 2010 National Employee Health and Fitness Day

This national health observance was created to promote the benefits of physical activity and well-being through worksite health promotion activities. Here are some ideas to build a healthy worksite on May 19th and beyond.

- Encourage activities that promote movement and are fun.
- Get a group of co-workers together and take a 30 minute walk.
- Try alternative commuting methods other than driving to work.
- "Take 10"- Take a 10 minute activity break during your workday and MOVE.
- Bring a healthy snack to work such as fruit or nuts. Encourage healthy snacks in break rooms and vending machines.

Asthma is a chronic disease without a cure. Fortunately, if you properly manage your asthma, you can reduce and even prevent asthma symptoms. It affects your airways that help you breathe by carrying air in and out of your lungs. When you have asthma your airways become inflamed, or swollen. This causes your airways to react strongly to things that you are allergic to or that are irritating. When your airways react, they get smaller, making it harder to breathe. Mucus may also develop, further blocking the airways.

Very few people are born with asthma; most people develop it as the result of exposure to asthma triggers such as allergens, pollution or pollen. Because you don't have asthma now, that does not mean you will never experience it. You may be exposed to an asthma trigger for the first time and discover it causes you to experience symptoms of asthma. If you are diagnosed with asthma, it is up to you to make sure it does not limit how you live your life.

Asthma Risk Factors

The following are risk factors for asthma:

- Living in large urban areas, especially the inner city
- Exposure to secondhand smoke
- Exposure to occupational triggers such as paint fumes or chemicals
- Having one or both parents with asthma
- Respiratory infections during childhood
- Low birth weight
- Obesity
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD)

Action Steps

1. Discuss your asthma with your doctor.
2. Create an asthma action plan with your doctor.
3. Identify your personal asthma triggers and avoid them when possible.
4. Asthma-proof your home to reduce your exposure to your asthma triggers.
5. Work with your doctor to determine when and where you should seek help in the case of a severe attack.
6. Take your medicine / always have your emergency inhaler within reach, even if you are not experiencing symptoms.

Other diseases related to Asthma

There are several diseases that may interact with your asthma.

- **Allergies** – Not everyone with asthma has allergies and not everyone with allergies has asthma, but allergies can make asthma worse.
- **Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)** – This is when the muscle between the esophagus and stomach allows stomach acid to move back up to the esophagus.
- **Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)** – This is a condition that can cause mild respiratory infections, colds and coughs in adults, but can produce severe respiratory problems in children, such as pneumonia.
- **Sinusitis** – This is when the cells that line the sinus cavity become inflamed.



Q & A: Seasonal Allergies

While most people look forward to the coming of spring, many people with seasonal allergies are not so excited. If you are sneezing, have itchy, watery eyes and congestion, you most likely have hay fever or allergic rhinitis.

Q: What are allergies?

A: An allergy is an exaggerated immune response or reaction to substances that are generally not harmful. Sometimes your body's defenses are too aggressive and attack harmless substances such as pollen or dust. Your immune system produces proteins called IgE antibodies that protect your body from substances that can make you sick or cause infection. When you have allergies, your body makes antibodies for substances it thinks are harmful to you but they're not.

Q: What causes allergies?

A: Your immune system is supposed to fight germs. When allergens invade your body, your immune system reacts even though they are harmless. The sub-

stances that cause the allergic reaction are called **triggers**. They trigger your immune system to produce antibodies which in turn release system chemicals that cause allergy symptoms.

Q: What causes seasonal allergies?

A: You are having an allergic reaction to a trigger, pollen. The pollen is released into the air from flowering trees in the springtime. The tiny grains of pollen, when airborne, can get into your nose, eyes, lungs, and skin and create an allergic reaction. Late spring and early summer also bring grass pollen which can cause itching or hives in those that are allergic to grass pollen. Fall allergies are usually related to weed pollen which commonly comes from ragweed or tumbleweed.

Q: How can I alleviate my allergy symptoms?

A: While allergies cannot be cured, symptoms can be managed and treat-

ed. Managing allergies may include making changes to your environment, avoiding triggers, and possibly taking medication to control your symptoms. While there are many over-the-counter allergy treatments, you may need to consult with your physician, or an allergist. They may refer you to an allergist, a specialist in the diagnosis and treatment of allergies. The allergist may need to perform allergy testing to determine exactly what you are allergic to and the best treatment for you.

COLD OR ALLERGIES?

The symptoms of cold and allergies may appear similar, but here are some tips for telling the difference:

- Both have the following symptoms: sneezing, runny nose, congestion, watery eyes, fatigue and headaches
- If you have a cold, you're likely to have those symptoms one at a time (i.e. sneezing, runny nose and then congestion), but with allergies it is usually all at once
- Cold symptoms usually last seven to ten days, allergies last as long as you are around the allergen and disappear shortly after you are not around it
- Colds often cause yellow mucus discharge, whereas allergies usually cause clear, thin mucus discharge
- When you sneeze two or three times in a row, it's usually allergies
- Colds are more likely in the winter, allergies in the spring through the fall
- Allergies are not associated with a fever

avoiding allergens



Here are some tips to minimize pollen exposure:

- * Keep windows closed to prevent pollens from drifting into your home or car
- * Minimize early morning activity. Pollen is usually emitted-between 5-10 a.m.
- * Stay indoors when the pollen count is high, or on windy days when pollen may be present
- * Avoid mowing the lawn and freshly cut grass