

Asthma is a serious disorder that makes breathing difficult. The World Health Organization says asthma affects about three hundred million people worldwide. An estimated two hundred fifty thousand people die from the disease every year. And more than five hundred thousand others are treated in hospitals.

Asthma happens when tissue that lines the airways to the lungs begins to expand or swell. This swelling makes the airways smaller. The muscles in the airways tighten.

Cells in the airways begin to produce a lot of mucous. This thick, sticky substance causes the airways to close even more.

This makes it difficult for air to flow in and out of the lungs.

This series of events is called an asthma attack. As asthma sufferers struggle to get air into their lungs, they may begin to cough a lot. They may also make a whistling or breathy sound called wheezing.

Some asthma sufferers have tightness or pain in the chest. They say it feels as if someone is sitting on them.

When asthma is most severe, the person may have extreme difficulty breathing. The disease can severely limit a person's activity, and even lead to death.

Doctors do not know what causes asthma. Researchers believe a combination of environmental and genetic conditions may be responsible.

Forty percent of children who have parents with asthma will develop the disease. Seventy percent of people with asthma also have allergies. Allergies are unusual reactions of the body's immune system to otherwise harmless substances or conditions.

Doctors have identified many of the things that may trigger, or start, an asthma attack. Triggers are things that cause the asthma sufferer's airways to swell.

Different asthma patients usually have different triggers. Allergens are one of the most common triggers. These impurities in the air cause allergic reactions.

Some of the more common allergens include animal hair, dust, mold and pollen.

Pollen is a fine dust that comes from grass, trees and flowers. Mold is a kind of fungus. It can grow on the walls or floors of homes. It is often in wet or damp areas like bathrooms, kitchens and basements. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that twenty-one percent of asthma cases in the United States have links to mold and dampness in homes.