

ADULT ONSET ASTHMA – MYTH OR REALITY?

Tools To Control Your Asthma & Allergies

The US Dept. of Health says every 12th American has asthma; these figures may be low since many have undiagnosed asthma. Asthma is the most chronic condition affecting children and is also more prevalent in women than men. In 1995, asthma and allergies cost employers an estimated \$1 billion to lost productivity and 14.5 million days of absenteeism. Many adult patients were diagnosed with asthma when children yet others weren't diagnosed till adulthood. How can this be? Many believe asthma is a children's illness. Is there such a thing as "Adult Onset Asthma", asthma that BEGINS in adulthood?

While asthma frequently begins in childhood, ***symptoms can begin at any age***. Asthma beginning after age 21 is considered 'adult onset'. Many people with "adult onset asthma" actually had asthma in childhood. Oftentimes childhood asthma is misdiagnosed as repeated bronchitis, persistent colds, croup or reactive airways disease. In many people asthma symptoms improve during puberty but return in later life. Adult asthma may be confused with emphysema or chronic bronchitis. Many patients with these conditions also have an element of asthma.

What **triggers** Adult Onset Asthma? Why do adults suddenly show symptoms of asthma? Often, recurrence or onset of asthma in adulthood seems to be *triggered by respiratory infections* in many people. Pneumonia, bronchitis and influenza may be followed by asthma symptoms. Infection-induced asthma may gradually improve over several months or may continue indefinitely. Theoretically patients with asthma have *inherited the potential for asthma*. They have an "asthma gene" which *may turn on during adulthood*.

Adult Onset Asthma is fairly easy to diagnose. The symptoms are similar to childhood asthma. Any combination of wheezing, coughing, chest tightness and shortness of breath may occur. *Pulmonary function* (lung function or Spirometry) testing is helpful in diagnosing the disease. Pulmonary function testing is easier to perform in adults than small children so the diagnosis of asthma can be more easily confirmed in adults and older children. A positive response to asthma medicines also supports the diagnosis.

For some older patients, Asthma or asthma-like symptoms may occur with acid reflux (GERD), heart failure, emphysema or chronic bronchitis. These medical problems occur more frequently in adults and may complicate the diagnosis and treatment of Adult Onset Asthma patients.

Lung function testing helps *distinguish* AOA from other respiratory conditions like COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), emphysema or chronic bronchitis. Patients with COPD have a fixed, nonreversible blockage to airflow, usually due to airway scarring or chronic infection. Most of these patients have a history of cigarette smoking.

Adult Onset Asthma is treated with the same strategies as childhood asthma, and avoiding irritants like cigarette smoke or allergens like cat or dust mite (in allergic patients) is important. Quick acting bronchodilators like albuterol are used by all asthmatics. Controller medicines like inhaled steroids are indicated in all patients with chronic asthma. Allergy shots may be helpful for some allergic adult asthmatics.

Many question if adults have any risks in using corticosteroids. *Inhaled steroids are preferred for all patients with asthma.* One particularly effective controller a combination of an inhaled steroid and a long-acting bronchodilator. Steroids given via injections or pills should be used cautiously by all asthma patients. Questions also arise to the dangers, **special considerations or complications** for AOA patients who use medications prescribed for other conditions such as heart problems, diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol or depression. **Most asthma medications are safe for adults regardless of other medical conditions.** Steroids administered via injection or pill form may cause a temporary increase in blood sugar in patients with diabetes. Adults with other serious medical conditions are at increased risk if diagnosed with adult onset asthma. Patients with significant heart disease are at particular risk since asthma can result in temporary decreases in blood oxygen levels during attacks. AAFA-TX advises adults who think they may have asthma to find a specialist they are comfortable with for proper diagnosis and a workable disease control plan.



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