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Asthma & Allergy Foundation of America, Texas Chapter, 9101 Quarter Horse Lane
Ft. Worth, TX 76123 817-297-3132 888-933-2232 info@aafatexas.org www.aafatexas.org

WHAT IS ADULT ONSET ASTHMA?

- * **Asthma isn't just a children's disease** although the majority of asthma patients are children. Asthma can begin at any age. There are a growing number of patients who first show signs of asthma as adults, many over age 40, even into their late 60's. Why? No one has a specific answer because scientists still don't know what causes asthma, the disease. **We know what triggers symptoms but we don't yet know why the disease strikes one person and not another.** Certainly, the cause is partly genetic and certainly partly environmental. If a parent had the disease there's a good chance the child will also. But why do some patients not show any signs of the disease until adulthood?
- * One theory is that those diagnosed with adult onset asthma did have the disease as a child but it was mild and perhaps was misdiagnosed as bronchitis, pneumonia or even colds. Another theory is that our polluted environment is leading to more allergic reactions and we know **allergies are an asthma symptom trigger**. Approximately **half those affected with adult onset asthma have allergic asthma**. Another theory is that sometimes asthma is misdiagnosed or overlooked in adults because normally, adults have a decrease in lung function as they age and some healthcare providers might attribute asthma symptoms to this normal aging process. Adult onset asthma can lead to serious complications so it is extremely important to have a correct diagnosis. Who might be a **target for adult onset asthma?**
- * **Women**. The link between hormone changes and asthma is now clear. Hormone fluctuations caused by pregnancy often lead to asthma and a decrease in estrogen levels during menopause can also trigger asthma disease.
- * **Obese persons** are very susceptible to this disease, another reason to remain active and eat moderately to maintain a healthy weight.
- * A **history of allergy** might trigger the disease in adults. Thirty percent of those first diagnosed as adults have a history of allergy, especially to cat dander, mold, dust, feathers (particularly in bedding), perfume or other common chemicals in our environment. Exposure to tobacco smoke and smoke in general is also another contributing factor, although **smoking tobacco itself doesn't cause the disease**.
- * Different **illnesses** including viruses and infections can also be a **factor for adult onset asthma**. These include not only pneumonia and bronchitis but also colds and flu which can all trigger asthma in a susceptible adult.
- * Asthma **symptoms** for adults are similar to those for a child: a dry cough, (especially at night), tightness or pressure in the chest, difficulty breathing, wheezing when exhaling, shortness of breath after exercising and chest colds that hang on for more than 10 days. The difference is, although kids' symptoms might be intermittent (now and then) **adults** who are diagnosed usually **have persistent symptoms**. A good day for them is one without symptoms.
- * It's often **difficult to diagnose adult onset asthma** correctly because other disease symptoms from hiatal hernia, stomach problems or rheumatoid arthritis mimic or imitate asthma symptoms. **COPD** or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease also has symptoms similar to asthma but **COPD is not the same as asthma**. COPD strikes adults also, but usually those who were or are smokers or those with a long history of bronchitis. It is possible to have both asthma and COPD at the same time, however. COPD in the form of emphysema is usually fatal. Controlled asthma usually is not.
- * Adult onset asthma can be very serious so it's **important for patients to manage their disease through** 1) **education** about the disease and new treatment developments 2) **compliance with any medications** prescribed. Take them exactly as directed, don't skip doses just because you're feeling better that day (you're feeling better because you're taking your meds) and don't take OTC meds of any kind without speaking to your healthcare provider or pharmacist first. **Many OTC drugs, like aspirin or other NSAIDs such as Advil, Motrin, Aleve or Naproxen** can trigger asthma symptoms in some adults. Many older adults also have other health problems like heart disease, high cholesterol, diabetes or arthritis and are on **prescription medications**. Some heart drugs like Beta Blockers and sometimes Ace Inhibitors might create **interactions** or negative side-effects with asthma medications and they can also provoke asthma symptoms, too. Work with your healthcare provider to develop a medication plan for all medications, even vitamin or herbal supplements. If you see more than one healthcare provider **share all medication information with each physician** to avoid serious drug complications. 3) Do **self-lung tests daily** with your peak flow meter. A Peak Flow can usually show early signs that lungs are tightening up before other symptoms appear. See your doctor regularly to monitor lung function and your medications, too. What worked last year might not work this year as your asthma changes. 4) If you have adult asthma definitely **get a flu shot** and ask your healthcare provider if you should have a pneumonia shot also.
- * Adult Onset Asthma is a very serious disease but with the proper diagnosis, a treatment plan, regular assessment, education and elimination of environmental allergens, it is a manageable disease. **You can control your asthma!** For more information about asthma and allergies, contact info@aafatexas.org or check our website www.aafatexas.org

Upcoming AAFA-TX programs: 1) Nov. 19, 1:30-4:30 pm "Asthma Management & Education" a continuing ed. program worth 3 contact hours for nurses, 2 hrs for respiratory therapists and 3 ACEP for pharmacists, Albuquerque, NM, Jan Tippett, instructor. Pre-registration required. Small fee for pharmacist credits. Contact info@aafatexas.org for more information.

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