

Gasping for air: Living with asthma

Have you had pains in your chest while exercising that felt like someone was squeezing your lungs? What about gasping frantically for air after you've climbed stairs? These types of situations are reality for more than one million Canadians suffering from asthma.

About one in 10 adults has this incurable disease. In children, asthma is more prevalent. It is estimated that up to 15 per cent of Canadian children will develop the disease.

What causes an asthma attack?

Asthma is a chronic disease that occurs when the lung's bronchial

tubes become inflamed. The tubes become blocked by mucus and discarded cells, which obstruct the "in and out" air-flow of the lungs. The result is tightness in the chest and breathing difficulties, coughing, wheezing and gagging.

Asthmatics are described as having "twitchy airways." This means that the bronchial tubes are extra-sensitive and become swollen or inflamed very quickly when exposed to a variety of triggers.

Not all asthmatics react to the same irritants. Some will be affected more severely than others. Triggers may include pollen, dust mites, ani-

mal hair, and smoke. It is important for each asthmatic to identify the specific irritants that cause their episodes and find ways to limit exposure to those particular things.

Why is it important to learn about asthma?

Every year approximately 500 Canadians die as a result of uncontrolled asthma. Physicians believe that the majority of these deaths could be prevented with proper management of the disease.

In the past few years there have been improvements in asthma management. Health professionals have acquired a better understanding of

the illness and what causes an asthma attack. However, many existing medications are still associated with side effects and are difficult to use. New research also hopes to help change this situation with the introduction of new, effective, safe and easy-to-use medications.

What do asthma sufferers want?

The ultimate goal of an asthmatic is to achieve freedom from symptoms, to live without restrictions and to be able to undertake any type of physical activity. For more information on asthma, support groups or new treatment options, talk to your physician.

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