

Raising awareness about asthma is critical, says expert

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Children with asthma use inhalers to relieve some of their symptoms, which include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and shortness of breath. Credit: Tradimus / Wikimedia commons / [CC BY-SA 3.0](#)

Millions of people in the United States, regardless of age, gender, race and ethnicity, are impacted by asthma, and the number of asthma sufferers is only projected to grow. To raise awareness about this disease, May is recognized as National Asthma and Allergy Awareness Month.

"Asthma is a disease characterized by airway inflammation and narrowing of the airways," said Dr. Nicola Hanania, associate professor of medicine in the section of pulmonary, critical care and sleep medicine and director of the airways clinical research center at Baylor College of Medicine. "Although, we can't cure asthma, there are medications and preventative actions that [patients](#) can take to control the disease."

Symptoms of asthma include coughing, shortness of breath, shortness of breath when exercising, wheezing and, although rare, feeling tired after performing tasks that you were previously able to do without issues.

Hanania added that most asthmatics have symptoms that are more uncontrolled at night than during the day.

A misconception about asthma that Hanania said he often has to address with his patients is that asthma is intermittent.

"Many patients come to me and say 'I only have asthma when I wheeze' or 'I outgrew asthma,' but that is not true," he said. "Asthma is a chronic disease so you will have it for life. You can't outgrow asthma, but the disease can be quieted for some time but may reemerge again later on in life."

Another misconception surrounding asthma is that patients think they can no longer exercise or do physical activity, but with proper treatment, asthmatics should be able to live healthy lives, Hanania said.

He explained that the disease is diagnosed by measuring [lung function](#) through a simple breathing test. Measuring lung function shows whether there is an airway obstruction.

Based on lung function and symptoms, asthma is then categorized into mild, moderate or severe levels. Additionally, there are several types of

triggers that can cause asthma. Although 70 percent of asthmatics have asthma triggered by allergens, some asthmatics are triggered by certain irritants such as smoke, fumes or perfumes. Respiratory infections, such as a viral infection, also can trigger asthma.

The aim when treating asthma is to make sure that the patient does not experience symptoms of asthma or have to use their rescue [medication](#) more than twice a week. If patients have symptoms every day, then their asthma is considered poorly controlled. To help manage asthma, medication and avoidance of triggers may not be enough and [lifestyle changes](#) may have to be made. For example, if a patient has a pet dog or cat, but their asthma is triggered by dog and cat allergens, it is unlikely they will be able to keep their pet.

"Asthma can be a complicated issue to tackle and the process of managing asthma is continuous," Hanania said. "Patients need to understand that preventative care is especially important in managing this disease. Preventative strategies will help avoid flare-ups, or exacerbations, of their asthma so that they don't experience a life-threatening asthma attack and have to go to the emergency room."

Many asthmatics rely on their rescue medications and this is an issue because that means they are not taking their controller medication every day, Hanania said. A rescue inhaler is meant to open up the airways temporarily in an emergency situation, but a controller inhaler has an anti-inflammatory medication that treats inflammation in the airways. If used every day, it can prevent inflammation from getting out of control.

"A lot of patients don't know all of this information," Hanania said.

"That is why education is a major component to [asthma management](#) as well. As asthma clinicians we have to make sure that we have in-depth conversations with our patients about the type of asthma they have, their asthma triggers, how to avoid triggers, what lifestyle changes they have

to make, the types of medications they are on, why they are using these particular medicines and how to properly use their inhalers. Giving patients all of this information will help them better manage their [asthma](#) so they can lead the best life possible."

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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