Asthma

Definition

Asthma affects all age groups but often starts in childhood. It is a disease characterised by recurrent attacks of breathlessness and wheezing, which vary in severity and frequency from person to person. In an individual, they may occur from hour to hour and day to day.[4]

Background

This condition is due to inflammation of the air passages in the lungs and affects the sensitivity of the nerve endings in the airways so they become easily irritated. In an attack, the lining of the passages swell causing the airways to narrow and reducing the flow of air in and out of the lungs.[4]

Symptoms

- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Tight chest
- Coughing
- Usually worse at night and early morning
- Can occur on its own or in response to a trigger e.g. allergy, cold, infection, exercise, smoke, pollution

May be associated with

- Fatigue
- Stress, anxiety and depression
- Pneumonia
- Delays in growth or puberty in children
- Rhinitis
- Conjunctivitis

Red Flags

Severe attack - increasing symptoms as above, being too short of breath to eat, sleep or speak, breathing more rapidly, drowsiness, confusion, exhaustion, dizziness, blue lips, fainting.

Pathology

- Genetic link atopy
- Can be caused by occupation e.g. isocyanates, flour, wood dust, latex, animals

Management

- Check for occupational cause and refer to an occupational asthma specialist if suspected
- Step-wise treatment as per NICE guidance - Inhalers – relievers and preventers or a combination, oral medication including leukotriene receptor antagonist, theophylline, and steroids
- Annual flu vaccine and one-off pneumococcal vaccine
- Lifestyle- No smoking, exercise regularly, eat healthily
- Avoid known triggers
- Regular review with GP clinic and/or specialist if needed

Prognosis

- In children, possibility that they may grow out of it, or improve and then come back later in life
- In adults usually a long-term condition which can be controlled with treatment

Potential impact on work

- Reduced performance or absence from work
- Could be caused by occupational exposure
- Having an asthma attack in work

Adjustments to consider

- If occupational cause - employer will need to be guided by specialist advice. Consider substitution or removal of substance causing symptoms, redeployment into different role, provision of respiratory protective equipment
- Review of first aid provision and training for managers/first aiders and staff e.g. how to treat and when to call for an ambulance
- Extra breaks to ensure eating properly and to minimise fatigue.
- Providing a fan/heater if needed to keep at optimal temperature.
- A quiet place to rest
- Time for appointment

References

1. NICE. (2017). Asthma: diagnosis, monitoring and chronic asthma management NICE guideline [NG80]. Available: https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng80. Last accessed June 2024
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3. British Occupational Health Research Foundation. (2010). Occupational Asthma A guide for Occupational Health Professionals, Safety Professionals and Safety Representatives. Available: https://www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/OA_Guide-1.pdf. Last accessed June 2024.
4. World Health Organisation. (2019). Chronic respiratory diseases. Available: https://www.who.int/health-topics/chronic-respiratory-diseases#tab=tab_1 . Last accessed June 2024.

Resources

5. British Occupational Health Research Foundation. (2010). Occupational Asthma a Guide for Employers, Workers and Their Representatives. Available: https://www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/OA_Guide-2.pdf. Last accessed June 2024.
6. Health and Safety Executive . Asthma. Available: https://www.hse.gov.uk/asthma/. Last accessed June 2024.