Asthma Dictionary

Acute Asthma Attack: Asthma symptoms that were bad enough to have to take your child to the emergency room or hospital.

Airways: The breathing tubes inside the lungs that carry air to the air sacs.

Allergen: Things that are not a problem for most people but in people with allergies can trigger the body’s immune system to develop symptoms of asthma and allergies. Dust mites, animals, pollen and mold are common allergens.

Asthma: A lung disease that causes the airways to swell, the muscles around the airways to tighten and the airways to make increased amounts of mucus.

Asthma Action Plan: Written instructions on how to manage your child’s asthma. This plan tells you what to do when asthma is well controlled and what to do when it is not well controlled.

Asthma attack or episode: When asthma symptoms develop or get worse. This may occur suddenly, with few warning signs, or build slowly over a period of hours or even days.

Asthma Educator: A health care professional who has additional training in asthma education. Certified asthma educators or AE-Cs have passed a special test to be certified to provide this education.

Beta agonist: See reliever.

Bronchial tubes: See airways.

Bronchodilator: A medication used by people who have asthma, to relax the muscles, and open the airways. This is also called a reliever or rescue medication. This medicine does NOT reduce the swelling inside of the airways.

Bronchospasm: When the muscles around the bronchial tubes (airways) tighten and let less air in and out of the lungs.

Bronchoconstriction: See bronchospasm.

Controller: Also called a long term control medicine. This is a medicine that is taken every day to control asthma and prevent symptoms. This medicine prevents swelling or inflammation in the airways.

Dander: Skin flakes from warm blooded animals that some people are allergic to.
Dry Powder Inhaler or DPI: A device that delivers asthma medications directly into the airways.

Dust mites: Small, microscopic insects that live in mattresses, carpeting and upholstered furniture. They do not bite, but cause allergies in sensitive people.

Environmental control measures: Special things done to reduce exposure to things your child is allergic to like dust mites, cockroaches and animal dander.

Exercise-induced asthma (EIA) or Exercise induced bronchospasm (EIB): Asthma symptoms that happen during or following strenuous exercise or playing.

Health care professional (HCP): Doctors, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, nurses, respiratory therapists and pharmacists.

Holding chamber: A tube-like device that is used with MDIs to help more medication get into the airways. Holding chambers have valves to hold the medicine in the chamber until the patient inhales.

Inflammation: Swelling that occurs in the airways as a response to an irritant.

Inhaler: See Metered dose inhaler and dry powder inhaler.

Irritant: Any substance that causes asthma symptoms that is not an allergen. Examples of irritants include tobacco smoke, chemical fumes, strong odors and air pollution.

Leukotriene modifiers: A type of controller medication in tablet form.

Long-term controller: See controller.

Metered Dose Inhaler or MDI: A device that delivers asthma medications directly into the lungs.

Mucus: Often called phlegm or sputum. Everyone produces mucus but people with asthma can produce large amounts when their asthma is not well controlled.

Nebulizer: A small, portable machine that makes liquid medications into a mist that can be inhaled. A nebulizer is used for small children unable to use an inhaler.

Peak flow meter: A device that measures how well the air is moving out of the lungs. This can tell if there is narrowing in the big breathing tubes. It can also tell us if medicines are doing their job.
Reliever—also called a quick relief medication: A medicine (usually inhaled) taken to relieve asthma symptoms quickly. This medication relaxes the muscles around the airways.

Rescue: See reliever.
Spacer: A short tube-like device that is attached to an inhaler to help the medicine go deeper into the lungs. Spacers do not have valves to hold the medicine inside until inhaled.

Spirometry: A computer test used to show how well the lungs work (lung function) and the level of asthma control. It measures how much air can be blown out of the lungs and how fast the lungs can blow the air out.

Steroids: A type of medicine used to reduce and prevent the swelling inside the airways. This can be given by mouth as a tablet or liquid (as a reliever), or as an inhaled medication (as a controller). These are often called inhaled corticosteroids or ICS. This IS NOT the same as the illegal steroids (anabolic) that some athletes use to build muscles.

Symptoms: Body changes you can see, feel or hear that let you know there is a change in your child’s health. Asthma symptoms include coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, tightness in the chest, and trouble breathing.

Trigger: Something that causes asthma to get worse or allergy symptoms to start.

Wheezing: The whistling sound that happens when air moves through a narrow or squeezed airway.