

ALLERGY CONSULTANTS

Adult and Pediatric Allergy

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COUGH VARIANT ASTHMA

The classic symptoms of asthma include coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness. However, a **chronic cough** can be the main symptom or only symptom of asthma in some patients. When a chronic cough is the major manifestation of asthma, it is referred to as “cough variant asthma.”

Cough variant asthma is often unrecognized as asthma, because wheezing may not be present. “Recurrent croup” and “recurrent bronchitis” are often treated from episode to episode only to realize later that the underlying problem was actually cough variant asthma. The symptoms may first begin after an upper respiratory tract infection and then seem to “settle in the chest.” A cough can be present day and night and can be forceful enough to provoke vomiting. This cough may have a “barking” or “honking” sound and can persist for months or even years. The person may cough as frequently as every few seconds. Wheezing or other symptoms of asthma are not usually present. Other conditions which can give similar symptoms to cough variant asthma include a chronic sinus infection, allergies with post nasal drainage, gastric acid reflux, pertussis (whooping cough) and rarely, aspiration (choking) of a foreign body (for example a piece of a peanut).

Common triggering factors for cough variant asthma include exercise, respiratory tract infections and allergies, but many times, the triggering factors are unknown. Most diagnostic tests including a chest x-ray will usually be normal. A measurable decrease in a lung function test may be noted, but can also be normal in many cases. Occasionally, a special breathing test called a Methacholine Challenge Test must be set up at a hospital. During this test, the patient does repeated breathing tests after inhaling gradually increasing concentrations of a substance called methacholine. This can conclusively prove the diagnosis of asthma. However, since it is time consuming and somewhat expensive, it is not done regularly. It is usually more realistic to give the patient a trial on asthma medication instead.

Cough variant asthma responds to the same medications and treatments used to manage the more classic forms of asthma. It is important to understand the goals and objectives of the treatment plan and discuss any problems with your physician.