

Asthma can't be cured but it can be controlled, says Renee Joyce Matthews, M.D., who has lived with the breathing disorder since she was 2 months old.



Asthma: The Hidden Indicators

By MARGENA A. CHRISTIAN

Renee Joyce Matthews, M.D., has lived with asthma her entire life. The wheezing started when she was 2 months old, the age at which she was diagnosed with the lung disease that restricts movement of air in and out of your lungs. “My mom was an asthma sufferer. She’s also a respiratory therapist, so when I was having breathing difficulties [at a young age], she called the physician,” says Matthews, a professional educator at ITxM Clinical Services, Cord Blood Donation in Chicago. “It turns out that I was allergic to formula and oatmeal. Whenever I was given those two items, I started wheezing. That’s when my mother learned I had allergies and asthma.”

The number of people in the United States with asthma continues to soar. According to the Office of Minority Health, almost 4.5 million non-Hispanic Blacks reported having asthma. Thirty percent of African-Americans are more likely to have it than non-Hispanic Whites. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported an almost 50-percent increase in rates among Black children from 2001 through 2009. Since asthma is chronic, education is the key to dealing with it in order to

maintain a healthy lifestyle. Matthews has since become an advocate for asthma education, sharing her knowledge and offering advice in an asthma column on the Web site blackdoctor.org.

“Asthma is an airway disease. You can’t cure it, but you can control it,” says Matthews. “If you’ve had pneumonia several times or bronchitis, this might scar your airways and can transform into asthma. There are pulmonologists who can do different

tests on the function of your lungs, check your airways and make sure you don’t have signs of inflammation. For people who have allergies, get tests run. If you do not treat your allergies, you can end up getting asthma. I got allergy injections every Saturday for five or six years. It definitely helped me because my allergies do not bother me at all.”

Asthma is also prevalent in poor communities where roaches are more common, she says. “The [excrement and debris] that’s associated with them can cause people to become allergic and have asthma attacks.”

The CDC reports asthma has a high cost for individuals and the nation. Matthews says having an Asthma Action Plan can save you from a lot of emergency room visits and expenses. Visit nih.gov and search “Asthma Action Plan” for more information.

Hidden Indicators:

- > Genetics
- > Allergy to anything environmental or ingested
- > Sinus headaches or regular headaches
- > Dry coughs, particularly at night or in winter months
- > Runny eyes
- > Itchy skin (most people who have eczema also have some form of asthma)



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