

Antibiotics for Asthma

A common antibiotic can improve breathing in some people with asthma. And although doctors may not be ready to hand out antibiotics to everyone with asthma, researchers say this shows that an underlying bacterial infection may be tightening the airways of many asthmatics.

"We believe that antibiotics may become an important addition to the therapeutic options for some patients with asthma," says study author Richard Martin, MD, professor at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, in a news release. Researchers say they aren't exactly sure how a bacterial infection may influence asthma. It may make existing asthma worse, or it may play a role in the development of the disease. The researchers looked at 55 people with mild-to-moderate asthma. Overall, 31 had signs of an infection with one of two common respiratory bacteria -- mycoplasma or chlamydia. But after six weeks of treatment with the antibiotic Biaxin, lung function improved significantly.

Their findings are published in the June issue of the journal *Chest*. In the study, the researchers took tissue samples from the lungs of the patients and tested for evidence of bacteria. This procedure is invasive and can be unpleasant for the patient. "At the present time, only select centers can appropriately perform the necessary tests. We are working on simpler methods to make the diagnosis easier," says Martin. After checking for the infection, the researchers gave each patient either the antibiotic Biaxin or a placebo for six weeks -- in addition to their regular asthma medications. Before the treatment began, there were no significant differences in lung function between the infected and noninfected patients.

After treatment, those asthmatics with bacterial infections who took the antibiotic had a major improvement in breathing, with improved lung function. Those without the infection who took the antibiotic showed no improvement. Despite their findings, researchers say they don't recommend widespread use of antibiotics to treat asthma. Existing asthma medications can adequately control symptoms in most asthma patients, and overuse of antibiotics could lead to more problems with the growth of drug-resistant bacteria, which is already a concern. However, the researchers say doctors may want to consider testing their asthmatic patients for bacterial infections if they are not able to control the symptoms even with maximum doses of standard medications. If the lungs do appear to be infected, treatment with antibiotics may then be appropriate.