What to Do if You Have an Asthma Attack Without Your Rescue Inhaler

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What to Do if You Have an Asthma Attack and Don’t Have Your Rescue Inhaler

As a person with asthma, I do my best to ensure I have my rescue inhaler with me at all times because having an asthma attack and no inhaler can be problematic. In fact, I have a rescue inhaler stashed in several places — in my car, in my purse, at my house. This way if I have an asthma attack, my inhaler is generally within reach. Theoretically.

However, we all know that things happen. Life happens. When I was working as a floor nurse, a cleaning product being used by the housekeeper sent me into an asthma attack.

My inhaler was in my purse, which was in my locker. You would think that working on a nursing unit, I’d have an albuterol inhaler readily available, but that was not the case.

It was a very busy night and I thought to myself, “I’ll answer one more call right before grabbing my inhaler.”, “I’ll give one more medication.”

Before I knew it, my wheezing was so severe that my manager could hear me from her office and she wheeled me to the ER. I spent the remainder of my shift there before the physician sent me home, prednisone prescription in hand.

I learned my lesson that night — I need a back-up plan for when my inhaler is not readily available.

Proper Planning

If your insurance allows, have several inhalers available – this allows you to have an inhaler accessible wherever you may need it. In addition to the inhalers kept in my car and at home, I have one in my purse. I keep several emergency medications in a small cosmetic bag (Benadryl, Epi-pen, albuterol inhaler). Keeping my emergency medications in the bag makes it easy to find during an emergency.

Although this will not help you if you do not have your inhaler, trying to prevent the situation from happening in the first place is vital.

Stay Calm

As we all know, staying calm when it feels as if you are breathing through a straw is easier said than done.

During an asthma attack, you are already breathing more heavily. If asthma and anxiety is added to the mix, this will most likely make the asthma attack worse because breathing can become even more difficult.

During an asthma attack, I try to focus on something pleasant. I love to be at the beach, so I may picture myself lying in the sun on my beach towel, listening to the sound of the waves. Visualization exercises are extremely helpful.

Breathing Techniques

Learning breathing techniques that can be used during an asthma attack are of the utmost importance. Breathing techniques can be used during any asthma attack, but it may be life-saving if you do not have your inhaler.

One such breathing technique is called pursed lip breathing. While there are other types of breathing that are designed to improve lung function in general, this breathing technique is used specifically when you are short of breath and helps to slow the pace of breathing.

Pursed lip breathing:

- Improves ventilation
- Released trapped air from the lungs
- Keeps the airways open for longer and decreases work of breathing
- Prolongs exhalation to a normal rate

This technique should be used when short of breath and can also be used during an activity that induces shortness of breath. However, keep in mind that learning how to perform this breathing technique takes work and should not be learned during an asthma attack.

Practice this technique four to five times per day until you are comfortable with it. In order to perform pursed lip breathing:

1. Keep the neck and shoulders as relaxed as possible.
2. Inhale through the nose. This inhalation should take two counts.
3. Purse the lips, exhaling through the pursed lips while counting to four.

With practice, pursed lip breathing will become second nature to you. Now if you find yourself in a situation where an asthma attack may occur and you are without your inhaler, you will be better equipped to manage it.