Your Guide to Managing Asthma Triggers

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Understanding and Avoiding Your Asthma Triggers

If you are anything like me, you have multiple triggers for your asthma symptoms. I’ve suffered from asthma for many years, but it actually took me a long time to identify why I was having symptoms — and then how to do something about it!

Below you will find an extensive list of asthma triggers — both indoor and outdoor — and an explanation of how to avoid that trigger, and if that is not possible, how to decrease exposure in order to reduce asthma symptoms.

Food Allergies or Intolerances

It may come as a surprise, but having an allergy or intolerance to a food can cause asthma. When a food allergy causes asthma symptoms, that specific type of asthma is called allergic asthma or allergy-induced asthma.

As someone who has suffered with asthma for as long as I can remember, being diagnosed with a food allergy in my 20s was unnerving. When I found out I had an allergy to milk products and eggs, I thought my world had turned upside down.

However, I was miserable — I frequently had upper respiratory infections and a nagging cough that would not quit. I also felt short of breath most of the time.

When I quit drinking milk and eating cheese and cut out my daily omelet, suddenly I could breathe again. I did not realize just how severe my asthma symptoms had been until I cut the offending foods out of my diet!

When someone who has a food allergy consumes a “forbidden” food, an allergic response is set into motion. The body mistakenly identifies the food as an invader and produces antibodies that bind to the allergen.

The chemical response elicited by the body leads to allergy symptoms — for most people, nasal congestion, runny nose, itchy eyes — and for some people, asthma symptoms.

Medication Options

An easy way to treat asthma associated with food allergies is to omit the foods from the diet and prevent symptoms from occurring in the first place. However, there are a few options that treat both allergies and asthma:

- **Montelukast (Singulair)** – this is a daily medication that helps control the immune response during an allergic reaction. On rare occasions, this medication is linked to suicidal tendencies.
- **Allergy shots (immunotherapy)** – after an allergy test, regular injections with small, increasing doses of the offending allergens are administered. This treatment reduces both allergy and asthma symptoms. The downside is that immunotherapy requires three to five years to complete.

- **Anti-immunoglobulin E (IgE) therapy** – Omalizumab (Xolair) is given to interfere with IgE in the body, preventing the allergic reaction that may trigger asthma symptoms. IgE is released in the body in response to an offending allergen. The next time this allergen is encountered, IgE triggers the allergic response by releasing histamine.

Tobacco Smoke

Tobacco smoke is a common asthma trigger. If you are a smoker and you suffer from asthma, quit smoking immediately. Secondhand smoke — or smoke exposure breathed in due to being near a smoker — can also trigger an asthma attack.

If you have asthma, you should not allow yourself to be around people who smoke, whether it is in your presence, in your car, or your home.

Smoking is harmful for several reasons — increased risk of cancer, heart attack, stroke and blood clot, to name a few. There are hundreds of reasons for quitting smoking and if these reasons are not enough, breathing with ease may top the list.

Smoking Cessation

Quitting smoking is easier said than done, but there are many resources available for smoking cessation:

- **The CDC's I'm Ready to Quit!** The site has many resources, such as tips for creating a quit plan, managing cravings and information about support groups. Notice on the right side of the screen information is available for a live chat phone number (1-800-QUIT-NOW).
- **The use of medications doubles the chances of successfully quitting smoking.** Medications include nicotine gum, lozenges and patches, all over-the-counter. Prescription drugs include buproprion (Zyban) ad varenicline (Chantix).
- **Seek support from others.** Look to friends and family who have successfully quit smoking, or therapists.

Cold Air

I can remember walking to school one morning. It was still dark out but the air was cool and crisp, the snow was sparkling and it was altogether a beautiful morning. However, I was wheezing so severely by the time I reached the elementary school that I hadn't noticed it.

At the time, it had not occurred to me that the cool, crisp air was the culprit of my symptoms. However, I now know that cold air is an asthma trigger for myself and many other asthma sufferers.

Cold air causes bronchoconstriction, which in turn causes difficult and stressful breathing. In fact, for people who live in cool, dry climates, cold air may actually *cause* asthma to occur in an otherwise healthy individual.

There is not much we can do about living in a cool climate (unless you want to pack your things and move to Hawaii!) but you can choose to limit exposure.

For example, if you enjoy exercising outside, even in the winter months, pick days where the weather is not quite as cool. Exercise at the warmer times of the day. Use a scarf to cover your mouth and nose — not a foolproof way to limit cool air exposure, but from personal experience, it may help a little bit!

Dust Mites

Dust mites are known to cause allergic and asthma symptoms in many people. This may be due to the fact that dust mites are very common — there can be hundreds of thousands of dust mites in our bedding, furniture, carpets and curtains. In fact, four out of five homes have detectable dust mites in their bedding.

Dust mites occur in almost all homes but require humidity to survive – homes with very low humidity tend to have a lower amount of dust mites.

Dust Mite Removal and Prevention

There are a variety of ways to manage dust mites in the home:

- **Remove humidity from your home.** Keeping humidity under 50% through the use of dehumidifiers and/or open windows is recommended.
- **Replace carpeting if possible.** Carpeting harbors dust mites. Replace it with new carpeting or with hard surfaces such as wood, tile or linoleum. If this is not possible, use a carpet cleaner containing benzyl benzoate, which is known to kill dust mites.
- **Wash bedding at least once per week in very hot water.** Very hot water can kill dust mites.

Animal Dander

I consider myself lucky that animal dander is not a trigger of my asthma symptoms because I have a lively beagle and yellow Labrador at home!

Animal dander is the tiny, microscopic flecks of skin shed by pets, such as cats, dogs, birds and rodents. This animal dander can cause allergy and asthma symptoms in people who are sensitive.

Animal dander is lightweight and small and can be suspended in the air. It can also be attached to furniture and bedding and also to items that are transported, such as clothing and bags. For this reason, animal dander can cause symptoms for people even when they are around the dander but not near a pet.

Minimizing Pet Dander

The best treatment for pet dander asthma is removal of the pet from the home. This is, of course, easier said than done as our pets can quickly become part of our families.

When it is not possible (or you are unwilling) to remove the pet from the home, follow these tips to reduce symptoms associated with animal dander:

- **Prescription medications, such as the previously mentioned Singulair, may be helpful.** In addition, ask your physician if the use of inhalers may be helpful
- **Immunotherapy may help.** It can gradually lessen the severity in allergy and asthma symptoms associated with animal dander.
- **Keep an area of the home pet-free.** The asthma-sufferer's bedroom is a good place for this. Prohibiting the animal from the room will drastically reduce the offending animal dander, reducing symptoms when you are in that area. Placing a HEPA air cleaner and purchasing covers for the bed and pillows are also recommended.
- **If possible, remove furnishings that can easily catch animal dander.** If it is not possible to remove furnishings, wash these furnishing frequently.
- **Bathe the pet weekly.** Not only will bathing the pet on a weekly basis reduce the amount of animal dander in the home, it will also get rid of other allergens that may cause asthma symptoms that are stuck on the fur from being outside.

It is important to note that people perceive "hypoallergenic" pets as safe for allergy and asthma sufferers. Animal dander is from the pet's skin, not the fur. Because of this, hypoallergenic pets probably will not reduce asthma symptoms.

The exception is if the fur is carrying in other allergenic materials that are causing symptoms, such as pollen.

Pollen

You’ve probably heard of hay fever or seasonal allergic rhinitis — both are terms for pollen allergies. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, an allergy to pollen is one of the most common triggers of seasonal allergies.

People with pollen allergies suffer a triple whammy — pollens comes from trees, weeds and grasses and bother asthma and allergy suffers during the spring, summer and fall. Grasses are the most common culprit of pollen allergies, with ragweed being the most troublesome.

Other common types of grasses include sagebrush, lamb’s quarters, pigweed and tumbleweed.

How to Avoid Contact With Pollen

For people with allergy and asthma symptoms associated with pollens, it is not reasonable to avoid contact completely. However, there are ways to reduce exposure. Here are ways to reduce symptoms during troublesome times:

- **Keep an eye on the pollen count.** A pollen count is a measure of how much pollen is present in the air. A good pollen count will even tell what types of pollens are present. The pollen count is often broadcast on a local weather forecast.
- **Limit exposure during peak times.** When you see the pollen count is high, avoid being outdoors during these times.
- **During pollen season, keep windows closed.** Use a HEPA air cleaner to purify the air. If necessary, use air conditioning.
- **Shower before bed.** Washing your hair before bed will reduce symptoms while sleeping and will also prevent the introduction of pollens into the bedroom.
- **Keep bedding clean.** If possible, wash your bedding in hot water once weekly.
- **When working outdoors, change clothing immediately after returning indoors.** Shower immediately after returning indoors if possible.
- **During peak season, limit exposure with pets if possible.** Pet fur can bring pollens into the home.

As you can see, it is possible to control asthma symptoms by controlling asthma triggers. Keep in mind that this advice is not to replace advice from your physician and should not be utilized in place of any prescriptions that you have been prescribed, but is simply to help figure out what may be triggering your asthma symptoms.