Know When and How to Act in an Asthma Emergency

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Is It an Asthma Emergency?

When you live with asthma, you make lifestyle adjustments to account for humid weather or pollution, but you still might encounter some wheezing or bouts of coughing now and then. For many asthmatics, there also comes a time when asthma symptoms spiral out of control, despite their best efforts.

One of the most difficult aspects of asthma management is knowing when to reach out for help. You're confident you can handle your mild symptoms, but how long do you leave them before you call a doctor? How far do you let them progress before calling an ambulance? What if you have an asthma attack but no inhaler?

It's always better to be safe than sorry, so err on the side of caution. Here are the signs and symptoms that signal a serious problem may be developing, and which steps to take to remedy the situation.

Warning Signs to Watch For

It's not easy to decide to go to the ER. For one, nobody actually *wants* to go to the hospital. But it's also hard to spot the point of no return, when your asthma is truly out of your control and you no longer have the power to treat it.

The first thing to do is use your peak flowmeter to see where you stand: if you blow into the meter and your peak flow is less than 60 percent of your personal best, you need to get to the ER.

However, there are other ways to spot an asthma emergency, too.

Suspicious Breathing Changes

Your lungs and airways are the main site of asthma symptoms, and they will tell you when something isn't right. Keep an eye out for these red flags:

- Serious symptoms that hit suddenly, without a gradual progression
- Symptoms aren't responding to medication
- Symptoms get worse despite resting and using your rescue inhaler
- Trouble talking or walking because of breathlessness

A sudden and severe loss of breath isn't the only cause for concern. If you find that you're overusing your inhaler just to maintain some degree of comfort, it's a good idea to at least call your doctor for advice on how to proceed.

Physical Signs That Point to Trouble

There are also some visible and physiological warning signs that can indicate your asthma is getting out of

control. Color changes, posture problems, and differences in the skin or pulse rate can come from oxygen deprivation. Seek medical attention if you notice:

- Lips or fingernails turning a bluish or grey color
- You're hunching your shoulders and straining your muscles to take in a breath
- Heavy sweating
- Pale, clammy skin
- Nausea
- Faintness
- Rapid heartbeat

You know your body best, and you'll be able to tell if something isn't right. Your breath (or lack of it) can quickly affect other systems and functions, so don't assume these changes are unrelated discomforts.

What to Expect at the Hospital

If your symptoms include dizziness and severe breathlessness, have someone take you to the hospital; if nobody's there to help, call an ambulance instead of driving yourself.

Once you have called the paramedics, try to make yourself as calm and comfortable as possible until they arrive. Rest assured they will get you to the hospital quickly and safely.

When you arrive at the ER, the medical staff will evaluate your breathing and test your blood oxygen level. The next course of action may be:

- A higher dose of medication
- Different inhaled medication (like Abuterol)
- Supplemental oxygen

An asthma attack is a frightening event, and though a hospital setting might not do much to calm you, take comfort in the fact that most asthma attacks treated in the ER are brought under control within two hours.

Your Next Steps

Your actions in the hours and days following your hospital visit can impact your recovery, and in the best cases, could pave your way to better asthma management and a higher quality of life. Communication is key, and you'll need to be proactive in your follow-up care.

Here are your three next steps once you leave the ER.

Get Your Medication

You may leave with a prescription for new medicine — fill that prescription as soon as possible. Even though the medical team at the hospital was able to calm your symptoms, problems could arise again at any time.

When you stop by the pharmacy after you leave the hospital, ask the pharmacist any questions you may have about the prescription, and be sure you fully understand the dosage and guidelines.

Talk to Your Doctor

Next, let your doctor know what has just happened. Once you're back at home, call to tell them you've been to the ER for an asthma emergency, and describe the events leading up to that visit.

Relate all information about any medications you've been prescribed by the ER doctor, and ask whether you should make an appointment to discuss your situation in person.

See an Asthma Specialist

If you have not yet seen a specialist, this may be the time to get a referral. One severe asthma attack may not seem like a big deal in the grand scheme of things, but every attack is an indicator that your asthma is not well controlled.

Ask your doctor to refer you to a trusted specialist, so you can go over your concerns and get some good advice on improving your asthma management.

Adjust Your Perspective

It’s natural for you to downplay the severity of your illness, or second-guess an appropriate course of action. However, doctors find many asthma sufferers lead themselves into worse attacks by putting off medical treatment.

The next time you suspect your asthma might be getting out of control, ask yourself what you would do if you saw a friend experiencing those exact symptoms. If you would take them to the hospital, you should do the same for yourself.