6 Easy Ways to Reduce Stress-Related Asthma Attacks

by JOSH DUVAUCHELLE

What Causes Stress-Induced Asthma?

If you or someone you know experiences asthma, you're not alone. The number of people who have this long-term inflammatory disease of the lungs continues to grow.

Right now, one in 12 Americans has asthma, an increase in the last few years. According to the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, this has resulted in a jump of $3 billion in medical costs.

While there are many triggers for an asthma attack, such as food additives and outdoor/indoor allergens, stress-induced asthma is one of the most common triggers that people experience.

What Is Stress-Induced Asthma?

Stress can not only trigger asthma, but it can also make your asthma symptoms worse. Doctors used to tell people, "It's all in your head." But studies have found a strong brain-body connection, and what's "in your head" can show up in your body.

One fascinating study published in the Proceedings of the US National Academy of Science highlights this connection.

A team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin exposed people to asthma triggers, such as dust and pollen, to cause tightening and inflammation in the lungs.

Once the study participants were experiencing symptoms of asthma, the researchers then had the participants read a series of words. Some were neutral words, such as "curtains." And other words were stressful or emotionally charged for the participants, such as "wheezing."

What they discovered is that the stressful, asthma-related words lit up the areas of your brain related to emotions, and made the inflammation even worse.

In other words, stress can prompt the start of asthma and, while you're having an asthma attack, make it even harder for your lungs to function properly.

Can Stress Cause Asthma Flare-Ups?

One study published in the Brain, Behavior, and Immunity journal, studied children. They found that if a child experienced a significantly stressful event, such as a close family member passing away, their risk of an asthma attack doubled.

Stress can create genuine changes in your body. Some of the most common ones that you're likely already

aware of, such as faster-paced breathing when you're under pressure, can obviously cause an asthma flare-up.

But other changes related to stress can make things worse, too.

For example, stressful emotions can trigger nerves that cause your muscles to tighten throughout your body. It's not uncommon for stressed people to clench their jaws and fists. But this applies to the muscles in your lungs, too.

This tightening and constricting can lead to coughing, wheezing and tightness in your chest.

Stress can also affect your hormones, which then affect your breathing. According to one study, stress triggers your immune system, which then may cause inflammation in your lungs and trigger an asthma attack.

All these factors go hand-in-hand with both creating flare-ups as well as making existing symptoms that much worse.

Stress-Induced Asthma Symptoms

The symptoms you'll experience if you have a stress-induced asthma attack is the same as all other forms of asthma, with the only difference that these symptoms are triggered by stress instead of pollen, dust, pet dander, etc.

Common symptoms include, but aren't limited to:

- Coughing
- Shortness of breath
- Wheezing
- Rapid breathing
- Tightness in your chest

Strategies to Treat and Reduce Stress-Induced Asthma

Gain control of stress and you can take back the power that stress-induced asthma robs from you. You have numerous strategies at your disposal to treat and reduce the stress that triggers a flare up and lung inflammation.

1. Slow Your Breath

This is a case of chicken and egg. Stress can make you breathe rapidly, which in turn can trigger a flare-up, which in turn can make you breathe even more rapidly. On and on the cycle goes.

If you're feeling stressed, follow your breath. Focus on bringing your mindfulness and awareness to the act of breathing instead of letting your breath run away from you.

Take a deep breath and slowly exhale. Pause, then breathe in. Try to do a count of 5 for each inhale and exhale.

2. Know Your Triggers

Identify the things that trigger your stress. Perhaps it's a work conflict or a specific person. Then, arm yourself by preparing in advance.

Be ready to face the stress trigger and have alternative, healthy ways to deal with the stress trigger. This may even include avoidance and removing yourself from the situation.

3. Try Yoga, Tai Chi, Meditation and Other Mindfulness Exercises

Classic mindfulness exercises, such as yoga, can help still your mind and interject peace and contentment into your internal thoughts.

You don’t have to join a yoga studio. Mindfulness apps, yoga videos online, and other home practices can help you minimize stress.

4. Get Enough Sleep

Not getting enough shut-eye can elevate your levels of cortisol, a stress hormone. Being well rested also creates an emotional buffer against stressful things. Try to sleep for seven or eight hours a night.

5. Exercise Daily

Regular exercise releases feel-good hormones that boost your mood and reduce stress. It also helps clear your mind.

Aim to exercise for 30 minutes a day, and consider doing it at the end of your day to rid your mind of all the mental clutter you might have accumulated throughout the morning and afternoon.

Keep in mind that some people experience exercise-induced asthma. Talk to your doctor for personalized advice.

6. Delegate and Ask for Help

You likely feel stress whenever you feel the pressure of too many responsibilities. Free up time as much as possible by delegating tasks and asking for help. You don’t need to do everything on your own.

For example, you can assign household chores to a family member, and delegate some administrative tasks to a coworker.

Whatever the cause of your stress, use these tools and tips to minimize your stress levels and reduce your risks of stress-induced asthma flare-ups. Having asthma is stressful enough. You shouldn’t have to worry about stress-based triggers, too.