4 Common Symptoms of Asthma Attacks

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Asthma Attack Symptoms

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, asthma is incredibly common — 1 in 13 people have asthma. 25 million Americans have asthma — this accounts for about 7.7% of adults and 8.4% of children.

In 2017, 11.4 million people with asthma suffered from at least one asthma attack; 3 million of these people were children.

What Is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung condition that causes inflammation when exposed to certain triggers. Everyone has different triggers, though there are commonalities: dust, cold weather, smoke, pollen and pet dander.

When exposed to a trigger, the airways begin to swell. This causes narrowing of the airways, making it increasingly difficult to push air through the lungs. As this happens, the muscles around the airways also tighten.

4 Common Symptoms of Asthma

Asthma is characterized by several common symptoms. Most people with asthma will experience the following symptoms. The symptoms may vary in severity, depending on the severity of asthma or the asthma attack.

Coughing, especially at night. An asthmatic cough is one of the most common symptoms, and it has a purpose — it helps to remove foreign particles and bacteria. This prevents infections from occurring in the upper respiratory tract. A cough may be productive or nonproductive.

- A productive cough rids the body of phlegm and mucus from the lungs. This may occur if the asthma is exacerbated by an upper respiratory infection.
- A nonproductive cough is a dry cough and does not bring up any substances from the airways; it is the most common cough experienced with asthma, and results from spasms of the bronchial tubes.

Wheezing. An asthmatic cough is typically accompanied by wheezing. Wheezing is a high-pitched whistling sound that is caused by the constriction of the airways. Wheezing is caused by inflammation of the airways; the most common cause is the combination of asthma and COPD. However, there are many causes of wheezing, such as anaphylaxis, a foreign object in the airway, heart failure and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

Shortness of breath. Shortness of breath can be a symptom of asthma. Because the airways are constricted, less air is available, causing shortness of breath. In fact, for many people, shortness of breath may be the hallmark sign, accompanied by a chronic cough. However, not everyone experiences shortness of breath — and shortness of breath may also be caused by other conditions such as emphysema and heart disease.

Chest tightness, pain or pressure. Chest pain can be frightening; a 2013 study indicated that for many people, chest pain was the only symptom associated with their asthma. The chest pain associated with asthma is related to the inflammation of the airways as opposed to chest pain related to the heart. However, it should still be taken seriously — if chest pain is experienced, it is best to speak to a health care provider right away to rule out an emergency situation.

Keep in mind that these symptoms may or may not manifest at the same time, and the quality of the symptoms may change during an asthma attack. It is important to note these symptoms and keep in touch with a healthcare provider, as significant changes may warrant a change in treatment.

Common Treatments of Asthma Attacks

The most common (and effective) treatment of an asthma attack is a quick-acting inhaler. A quick-acting inhaler, such as albuterol (ProAir HFA, Proventil HFA, Ventolin HFA, others) and levalbuterol (Xopenex), allows the airways to expand quickly because the medications can get deep into the airways, allowing them to open.

Typically, healthcare providers recommend using one of the above prescribed quick-acting inhalers at the onset of symptoms. Two to six puffs of the inhaler may be prescribed. After 20 minutes, an additional treatment may be recommended if symptoms are not improved. Children who have a difficult time using an inhaler may require a nebulized form of the inhaler.

When symptoms are very bad, or do not improve with the quick-acting inhaler, emergency treatment may be required.

How to Prevent Asthma Attacks

Prevention of asthma attacks is preferable to treatment of asthma attacks. Here are some key tips to preventing asthma attacks from occurring:

- Identify asthma triggers; stay away from, or minimize exposure, these triggers if possible
- Avoid cigarette smoke
- Prevent illness from occurring
- Practice hand hygiene
- Get vaccines as recommended by your healthcare provider
- Take asthma medications as recommended