How to Tell if You’re Experiencing an Asthma Attack

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Am I Having an Asthma Attack?

As someone with asthma, whenever my symptoms flare, I get a bit nervous. I do a mental check – do I have my rescue inhaler? Do I have Benadryl? Do I have my phone handy and know what to do in case my breathing gets worse? Also, am I having an asthma attack?

Knowing what to do in the event of an asthma attack is important – it is a good idea to have a plan in place before an asthma attack occurs. Why? Because then you will know what to do because you will inevitably be panicky enough because of your breathing.

Asthma Symptoms vs Coronavirus Symptoms

Currently, we are worried that every sniffle and cough may be COVID-19. This worry is extremely valid; COVID-19 is still in its infancy and there is much that we do not know.

Fortunately, if you have asthma, most of your coughing and wheezing may not be related to COVID-19. Knowing how to identify the symptoms may help you differentiate.

Though there is a long list of COVID-19 symptoms, there are common symptoms frequently associated with upper respiratory infections:

- Fever (greater than 100.4F)
- Joint and muscle aches
- Dry cough
- Shortness of breath

Symptoms of asthma also may also include a dry cough and shortness of breath. There also may be wheezing and chest tightness, which is less frequent with COVID-19. If your symptoms are not similar to your “norm” or you have doubts, it is wise to seek medical advice or get a COVID-19 test.

How to Recognize Early Asthma Attack Symptoms

Common symptoms of asthma:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness
- Breathing rapidly

An asthma attack occurs when these symptoms intensify. Recognizing these symptoms as they worsen can prevent an attack from becoming life-threatening.

According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, five things happen during an asthma attack:

- The airway branches become more sensitive and react to things that may trigger an asthma attack.
- The lining of the lungs swells, becoming more and more inflamed.
- Mucus begins to clog the airways.
- Bronchospasm occurs, which is when the muscles surrounding the airways tighten.
- It becomes increasingly more difficult to move air through the airways.

What to Do During an Asthma Attack

There are several important steps to take during an asthma attack. It is important to take these steps because they help to move air into the lungs. Without proper airflow through the lungs, an asthma attack can be fatal.

First, you should sit upright. Sitting upright allows for proper expansion of the lungs. It can be tempting to lie down, as lying down can be calming, but resist the urge and sit upright until you are breathing better.

Next, take a puff of a rescue inhaler every 30 to 60 seconds, with a maximum of 10 puffs. An example of a rescue inhaler is albuterol or Xopenex. Be sure to remain calm. However, if symptoms do not improve after 10 puffs of the rescue inhaler, call for emergency assistance. If it takes more than 15 minutes for emergency medical assistance to arrive, begin taking more puffs of a rescue inhaler every 30 to 60 seconds.

Breathing Exercises

It is also helpful to learn breathing exercises before so that they can be utilized during an asthma attack:

- **Pursed lip breathing:** Breathe in through the nose and breathe out through pursed lips. Attempt to keep the exhale two to three times longer than the inhale.
- **Belly breathing:** Place the hands on the belly and breathe in through the nose. Keeping the neck and shoulders relaxed, breathe out. Attempt to keep the exhale two to three times longer than the inhale.

Asthma Action Plan

Everyone should have an asthma action plan – a plan that is created with your healthcare provider. An asthma action plan clearly defines how you are going to manage your asthma when you are doing well, when it is getting worse and when it is hitting emergency territory. Everyone's plan is individualized to them, so it is best to keep a copy of it on hand in your wallet, your purse, or even on your phone.

You can find various asthma action plans; some are printable and some are electronic. Make sure you know where your asthma action plan is so that when your symptoms worsen, you are able to reference it!

What You Should Do if You Suspect You Have Asthma…

If you think that you may have asthma, it is important that you make an appointment with your healthcare provider. Without proper diagnosis, you cannot get proper treatment, and proper treatment can be lifesaving!

Unfortunately, there is no cure for asthma. However, there are many different treatments in the form of inhalers and oral medications that can make asthma manageable. It is also important to obtain a diagnosis so that exacerbations can be prevented.