Tips for Coping With Asthma During the Chilly Season

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Managing Cold Weather Asthma

As a longtime asthma sufferer, I've discovered certain things that trigger my asthma, despite my best efforts at controlling it with medications. For example, dust can get me wheezing for hours. I love a brisk walk, but anything faster and I'll be on the side of the road, huffing and puffing, barely able to catch my breath. And cold weather — well, that gets me every time.

To boot, I live in one of the coldest and snowiest regions of the country. As someone who also enjoys winter sports, such as snowboarding and snowshoeing, I don't let the cold air keep me inside. I've discovered certain tips and tricks that help my breathing during the chilly season.

In this article, we'll take a closer look at the connections between asthma and cold weather, so you can learn how to manage symptoms and get the best out of the cooler months.

What is Cold-Induced Asthma?

Growing up with asthma, many people learn what triggers their symptoms. For some, changes in the weather can mean flare-ups, especially for those living in areas that get snowy winters. But why does our asthma get worse with the cold?

For starters, cold air is usually dry air, which can irritate your lungs and make it more difficult to breathe. When you breathe in cold air, it can also increase the amount of mucus your body produces, which can make breathing difficult. These two combined will trigger asthma symptoms, and may lead to an asthma attack if not properly managed or treated.

4 Ways to Manage Asthma in Cold Weather

Take Advantage of Mild Weather

Where I live, we have weeks with subzero temperatures and wind chills can plummet into the negative digits. I have discovered that the colder the temperature, the harder time I have being outside.

However, winter is long. Although it feels like those negative digit days drag on forever, that isn't the case — there are also plenty of days where the temperatures are mild. On those days, my symptoms are much less severe, so I take full advantage of them.

During the winter months, I watch the forecast and plan my activities around the temperature. If I see a mild day, I'm planning to get a babysitter and go snowboarding. When I see the bitter cold, I'm more apt to stay in doing indoor activities.

Don’t Forget Your Rescue Inhaler!

Despite my best intentions, sometimes my asthma acts up and I may need to reach for my albuterol inhaler. Ensuring it is always packed in my purse, backpack or snowboard bag is key.

As someone who also suffers from migraines and severe allergies, I keep a small bag packed with my inhaler, migraine medications, an Epi-pen and other miscellaneous medications at all times. The small bag can be easily transferred from bag to bag, depending on that day’s activities.

Prevent Illness

Although we can get sick any time of year, winter is known to be a time of illness. When we’re sick, especially with cold and flu viruses, our asthma symptoms worsen. Preventing illness from occurring in the first place is important.

One easy thing that can be done is getting your flu shot. The flu vaccine typically should be received as soon as it is available, in October — but if you haven’t gotten it, it can be given as late as January.

Flu season typically peaks in January or later so the idea is to get the vaccine *before* flu season kicks off.

Washing your hands is especially important. This can rid viruses from your hands, preventing you from getting them into your mouth, eyes or nose. It also prevents the spread of viruses from one person to another.

Stay away from people who are sick. If you know your friend has an upper respiratory infection and you have lunch plans, it is best to reschedule. Likewise, if you are sick, you should stay home as well. This can help prevent the spread of viruses to other people.

Keep Your House Clean

This may seem like a strange tip, but bear with me.

I love to spend time outdoors, but it is undeniable that more time is spent indoors during the winter months. This means increased exposure to indoor allergens, which can be worse during the cool months.

That means that asthma can be worse whether you’re inside OR outside.

For example, I know that dust exacerbates my asthma. Although I keep up with dusting my bookshelves and countertops, my bed takes a hit because my house is kept at a warmer temperature than the summer months due to air conditioning.

Dust mites thrive in warm temperatures so I’ve learned to vacuum (yes, vacuum) my mattress and to keep allergy covers on my bed. These can be placed on top of the mattress, but under the sheets.

If you’ve got indoor allergies that trigger your asthma, keeping your living space clean can help!