Tips for Managing Asthma in the Workplace

by CLAIRE SAUNDERS

Working With Asthma

“Are you sure you’re okay?” my boss asked. I struggled to croak out an affirmative answer. It was the second month of what I thought was a particularly violent cold. I was constantly coughing, and every breath sounded like the ominous wheeze of Darth Vader. I had become a frequent flyer at the local urgent care and campus health center. Eventually, I got my diagnosis: adult onset asthma, which I later found out was severe eosinophilic asthma. In this article, I'll be talking about what it is like working with asthma and how to cope with it.

By day, I am a graduate student working toward my Ph.D. in computational materials science. That means I spend my days sitting at a computer writing code and processing data. Since my diagnosis, I have had to learn to manage my asthma as it affects my work life.

Here are some tips and tricks I have learned along the way while working with asthma full-time:

Avoid Triggers

Thankfully, I do not work in a chemistry lab, or else this point would be a lot more challenging. Aside from laboratory-grade chemicals, more mundane allergens such as mold, dust mites, cockroaches, cleaning supplies and second-hand smoke can also be asthma triggers. If you cannot find a way of eliminating the triggers in your workplace, you can minimize them through the use of air filters and personal protective equipment, like allergy face masks.

My colleagues are always on the lookout for asthma triggers in the workplace. Motivated by a particularly bad stretch over the summer, where Los Angeles violated federal smog standards for 87 consecutive days, one of my colleagues made an indoor air quality monitoring system with an Arduino, like this one here, to monitor the Air Quality Index (AQI) in our offices. That way, we can remotely check the AQI, and if Los Angeles is having a bad air pollution day, we can decide to work remotely. While this is a more geeky approach than most would take, it is a way my colleagues and I avoid external environmental triggers.

Don’t forget that your employer is responsible for ensuring that their employees have safe working conditions. That includes healthy and clean air. If you are being exposed to a potentially dangerous environmental asthma trigger at work, report it through the proper channels.

Be Prepared

As an asthmatic, you should always have an albuterol rescue inhaler on hand. I know a surprising amount of asthmatics who don't do this. Honestly, I used to be one of them. It was not until I had an asthma attack with no inhaler in sight that I started carrying a rescue inhaler with me at all times.

While most asthmatics know their triggers, things can still catch you by surprise. I keep an inhaler in my desk in

my office in case I have an asthma attack at work. That way, I can take my inhaler and get back to work as quickly as possible.

When it comes to my medical care, I know what I want. I never want my colleagues to have to make medical decisions on my behalf if for some reason I am unable to do so for myself. This is why I wear a Medical ID bracelet. I keep it simple with information about where to find my albuterol rescue inhaler, contact information for my emergency contact and a note to check my iPhone Medical ID for more detailed information on my health and current medications. For people who are less technologically inclined, you can also use a medical ID wallet card or even a simple handwritten note.

Talking to Your Colleagues About Asthma

Asthma is unique because its symptoms range from silent, chronically inflamed airways to loud coughing, wheezing and breathing. It can progress from an invisible illness to being an overt attack in a matter of seconds. A full-fledged asthma episode can rapidly become a medical emergency that requires expedient action by the person experiencing the attack and those nearby.

As a graduate student, I spend a lot of time at work. As a result, it is necessary for me to inform and educate my coworkers about asthma and what they can do to help when I am having an asthma attack.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), approximately 1 in 13 people have asthma. I have several colleagues who have asthma or struggled with asthma as kids. If they do not have asthma, they often have a sibling or close friends who do. As a result, I find most people to be understanding and empathetic to the needs of those with asthma.

I very openly talk about my asthma so that my colleagues are mindful of the need to make sure our shared work environment is asthma friendly. My colleagues are curious people, and they had plenty of questions when I told them about my asthma. I made it a point to educate and correct any misinformation they might have heard. I also showed them where I keep my rescue inhaler and how to help me use it in case of an emergency. At the end of the conversation, we all felt better because I felt safer and they felt empowered to assist, if necessary.

How to Talk to Your Boss About Asthma

In the past six weeks, I have been hospitalized for my asthma three times. (Yeah. Asthma sucks.) During that time, I managed to maintain 90% of my normal work hours. This would not have been possible without some open and honest communication with my boss. We have been working together for four years now, which is about as long as I have had asthma, so we have developed a routine that we follow when my asthma acts up.

Any time I am hospitalized, I send my boss an email to update him on whether I will be working remotely or adjusting my work schedule to accommodate my hospitalization. Since my work is flexible, we have an understanding that when I am hospitalized and have to miss work, I will make up the hours another time. This is not possible if you have a job that requires you to be at your desk or workplace for specific shifts or hours. In these situations, a more feasible solution is swapping shifts with a coworker or utilizing your company’s medical leave policies.

I am very fortunate in that I have an incredibly understanding boss. He knows I get my work done around hospitalizations and various doctors appointments. Not everyone is so lucky. If your asthma is severe, you might qualify for disability or other reasonable workplace accommodations.

Changes made in 2008 to the American Disability Act (ADA) now include protections for people with allergies and asthma controlled by medications. If you run into issues in the workplace, the Department of Justice runs an ADA hotline to answer questions and to assist in filing workplace complaints at 800-514-0301 (voice) or 800-514-0383 (TTY). There is also a ton of useful information on the ADA website at www.ada.gov.

The Takeaway

As I say all the time on my blog, “It ain’t easy being wheezy.” This holds true in the workplace. While you cannot always be in complete control of your asthma, you can take the proper steps to make your work environment asthma friendly and make your colleagues asthma literate.