Tips to Help Asthmatics Recognize and Prevent Bronchitis

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Asthma and Bronchitis

In both asthma and bronchitis, the narrowing of the airways (due to mucus, inflammation, or spasm) causes the coughing, tightness, and wheezing that can leave you feeling breathless and anxious. Each condition can sap your energy and affect your ability to breathe comfortably, which will surely affect your quality of life.

On the other hand, there are a few important differences between the two conditions, and the quicker you can learn to spot them, the more likely you can avoid unnecessary discomfort – and serious complications.

The Differences Between Asthma and Bronchitis

Asthma and bronchitis each affect the respiratory system, but they do so in different ways.

Coughing and wheezing are common in both, but the symptoms stem from different sources: bronchitis irritates and inflames the mucous membrane that lines the bronchial tubes, while asthma causes inflammation and swelling in the muscles around the airways. In both illnesses, narrowing airways can be blamed for the coughing, wheezing, and breathing difficulties.

Since both asthma and bronchitis affect the function of the airways, it can be difficult to tell them apart. However, there are a few factors that separate bronchitis from an asthma attack:

- **Fever**. When a virus or bacteria is involved, bronchitis often brings a mild fever (as would be expected with an infection). Asthma, on the other hand, doesn't cause fever or chills.
- **Phlegm**. Both conditions can cause a feeling of tightness in the chest, but with bronchitis, this sensation is often the result of mucus buildup. During an asthma attack, the muscles throughout your airways tighten, causing the feeling of tightness.
- **Duration**. Asthma is a chronic disease, and attacks can hit suddenly, intensely, and repeatedly in the presence of an asthma trigger. Bronchitis that can be traced to an infection typically resolves itself once your body has fought off the virus or bacterial invader – somewhere between a few days and a few weeks.

While most cases of bronchitis are short-lived, chronic bronchitis is different. Usually arising from long-term exposure to irritants (tobacco smoke, chemicals, or toxic fumes), chronic bronchitis involves a phlegm-producing cough and wheezing that persists for months or years. However, both acute and chronic bronchitis can have long-lasting effects on the respiratory system.

Can Bronchitis Lead to Asthma?

Although bronchitis and asthma have different sets of sources and symptoms, each condition can provoke the other.

It’s no surprise that chronic bronchitis can worsen your asthma symptoms if you already suffer from asthma, but even bronchitis caused by a virus can interfere with the long-term health and function of your airways.

In some cases, a bad case of viral bronchitis can actually change the airways, leaving you prone to asthma attacks for the rest of your life, regardless of whether or not you have an infection.

Asthma can make you more vulnerable to bronchial infections because your airways are more sensitive to irritation and inflammation. If an asthma sufferer does contract bronchitis, it can cause deep and lasting discomfort, perhaps even leading to chronic asthmatic bronchitis – a serious condition that requires ongoing treatment.

Spotting and Treating Asthmatic Bronchitis

Simply put, asthmatic bronchitis occurs when an asthma patient contracts bronchitis. However, the manifestation of the illness isn’t always so simple, and treatment isn’t always straightforward.

Be aware of new or intensifying asthma symptoms – if your wheezing, coughing, mucus production, or energy levels are worsening, it’s fair to suspect that bronchitis may be complicating your asthma.

Types of symptoms and their severity can differ, so you and your doctor will build a treatment plan around your particular discomforts and general state of health:

Take Care of Immediate Symptoms

If your doctor suspects a bacterial infection, they will prescribe a course of antibiotics, but more often a virus is to blame. In the case of a viral infection, the aim is to ease the symptoms until the virus runs its course.

Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Advil) can relieve chest pain, aches, and fever that comes with your airway inflammation. Cough medicines are sometimes helpful, but since coughing is one way your body can rid the mucus and eradicate the infection, your doctor may decide it’s not a good idea to suppress the cough with medicine.

Also, warm, humid air is a natural decongestant: a few drops of eucalyptus oil in a bowl of hot water can help open up and soothe your airways as you breathe in the steam.

Prevent Further Discomfort

In many cases of asthmatic bronchitis, a short-acting bronchodilator will help to open the deepest level of your airways for easier breathing, and your doctor may suggest a new prescription or your usual bronchodilator paired with inhaled corticosteroids for better results.

Additionally, chest percussion and postural drainage techniques can help to loosen mucus so you can expel it more quickly. If your bronchitis is severe, your doctor may decide to that steroid drugs or supplemental oxygen are necessary to prevent complications.

Tips to Help Asthmatics Prevent Bronchitis

Nobody is immune to the bacteria and viruses responsible for most respiratory infections, but some people are better at dodging the threat. Smart precautions during cold and flu season are important, but you should also take steps to keep your surroundings clean and free of irritants all year round:

- Don’t smoke, and stay away from people who do.
- Get a flu shot every year. The flu is a powerful respiratory illness that can complicate your lung health and asthma symptoms.
- Consider a pneumonia shot, if your age or another health condition puts you at greater risk.

- Drink plenty of fluids to keep your body hydrated, your throat moist, and your mucus thin.
- Avoid asthma and bronchitis triggers. Allergens, chemicals, pollution, and certain medications are known to spark asthma attacks, but can also set the stage for a bronchial infection.

You may not be able to control your work environment or the air quality outside, but try your best to keep a clean home. Use a HEPA filter vacuum and air purifier, dust often, and wash your bed linens regularly in hot water.

When you live with asthma, your top priority should be to help your airways however you can, which involves as much prevention and protection as symptom treatment.