What to Do During an Asthma Attack

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Recover Your Breath and Restore Control

Asthma affects millions of people, and although there are plenty of treatments to manage common daily symptoms, asthma attacks claim many lives each year. One major issue is the confusion surrounding what qualifies as an emergency, and what to do during an asthma attack: asthma sufferers are used to dealing with some respiratory discomfort, so when symptoms are on the rise, many people ignore the problem. That's a dangerous decision.

Whether you've experienced a severe asthma attack or not, it's important to know how to get the oxygen your body needs, and help you to avoid more serious complications.

Learn to Recognize the Emergency

It may seem obvious, but recognizing the severity of your asthma attack is an important step in getting things under control quickly and easily. Many asthmatics may figure they can ride out the discomfort, or are too shy to ask or demand help from those around them.

However, if you have any of the following symptoms, it's time to take the episode seriously:

- You're too out of breath to finish a sentence, eat, or walk
- Your inhaler isn't helping
- The wheezing and tightness in your chest is getting worse
- Your breathing is speeding up and it's difficult to control
- Your lips are beginning to turn blue

Sometimes a bit of breathlessness can make you very anxious, which will make your breathing worse and likely frighten you a fair bit. The most important thing to do is stay calm – the more anxious you get, the worse it will be for your airways.

Some slow, controlled breathing and a bit of comforting visualization can bring your respiration back to a reasonable range and distract your mind from negative thoughts. Rest assured that there are plenty of people who are able to help you get through the attack, and the ambulance is only a call away, if it should come to that.

Next page: the plan of action.

Treat Your Airways

Obviously, relaxing your airways is first and foremost when you're in the middle of an asthma attack, and that will take a few steps. Stay calm, and follow this plan of action:

Measure Your Breath

If you use a peak flow meter at home, you can breathe into it at the first sign of your attack to see how your lungs are managing. If you are having an asthma attack, the reading will be below your personal best; if the value is less than half your best, you're having a severe attack.

Measure again after you take your fast-acting asthma inhaler to see how well the medicine is working (or how severe the attack is).

Take Your Rescue Medication Properly

Resist the temptation to take too much medication too soon. Start with two puffs of your quick-acting bronchodilator. If the episode is sudden and very severe, you can safely use up to four puffs at once. If the attack continues, you can continue to take a puff every 20 minutes for up to two hours, but the more you take, the more likely you are to feel a bit jittery.

Fight the Inflammation With Corticosteroids

Your rescue inhaler will ease the muscle constriction around your airways, but you'll also need to relieve the tissue inflammation and mucus buildup on the inside, which calls for a dose of corticosteroids. An inhaled corticosteroid is likely enough to manage a mild to moderate asthma attack, but a severe attack will normally call for prednisone tablets.

Sit up and Stay Focused

It's important that you sit upright and concentrate on steady breathing – this will keep you focused on getting enough air into your airways as the inhaled medication does its job. The straighter you sit, the better your lungs can take in air, so avoid laying down or hunching over.

If you don't feel better after taking your inhaler, or you get worried at any time, call an ambulance. It's always better to be safe than sorry.

Next page: when you're caught without your inhaler.

When You're Caught Without Your Inhaler

Many asthmatics travel everywhere with their inhaler, just in case this worst case scenario should happen. But circumstances could arise where you don't have your trusty medicine to help you through the worst of it, and if that's happened to you, you're certainly not alone.

Luckily, there are a couple of things that can help you weather the storm, or at least give you some time to get the help you need:

- **Stay calm**. It's been said before, but it deserves extra attention: if your asthma is acting up, relaxing your mind and body will help to relax your airways.
- **Move away from the situation**. Asthma attacks are very often caused by specific triggers, and you may have wandered into a danger zone without even noticing. If you're in a closed room, get into a well-ventilated area; if you smell chemicals or smoke, go outside or get into some fresh air right away.
- **Have a coffee.** It won't magically fix the situation, but a cup of hot coffee for an asthma attack will give you a jolt of caffeine that can help to open up the airways for a short time before you can get medical help. Don't go crazy on the caffeine – too much can make you more anxious and jittery.

If you can't treat yourself with your asthma medication and your symptoms aren't getting better, you'll need to visit the hospital. Don't wait until you can't breathe before you see a doctor, since severe asthma attacks can

quickly become life-threatening.

Learn from your Experience

Experiencing an asthma attack is certainly scary, but getting through it can be an empowering experience. You were able to stay focused, get the treatment you need, and return to a comfortable state.

After your breathing is back to normal and you're relatively relaxed, take the next steps to better asthma management:

Take Notes

Jot down a few sentences in a journal to record the details of your attack. What were the earliest symptoms? Were you feeling different sensations than usual? How did you try to treat the symptoms once they started, and how did that approach fall short?

The better you can track your asthma patterns – and more importantly, the episodes that don't fit the pattern – the more accurate you can report to your doctor and get on track with a better asthma management plan.

Write an Asthma Action Plan

Once you know what symptoms and challenges you can expect, you'll be able to craft a targeted asthma action plan to handle any future episodes. Work with your doctor to include the specific types of medication to take in every circumstance, and clarify when and how to seek help.

Even if you managed to suppress your asthma attack, it's important that you report it to your doctor within 48 hours. Asthma attacks are signs that you're not controlling your asthma well enough, and that can spell major trouble for your respiratory health. A stronger preventative medication may be needed, or else you'll have to be more attentive to your management plan.

Even when you're breathing easy, you need to take your prescribed medication to stay in control and one step ahead of your condition.