Managing Asthma in Hot and Humid Weather

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Coping With Asthma and Heat

You probably know the major asthma triggers well — tobacco smoke, pollen, extreme exercise, pet dander — but there are others that lie in wait for the warmer months.

New allergens and irritants can begin to bother you as the weather warms, and both heat and humidity have been found to trigger asthma episodes, too. Research shows that extreme temperature (over 100 degrees Fahrenheit) can bring on symptoms, and since humid air is more difficult to breathe, it can strain the lungs and airways even more.

If you live in a hot and humid place, the key to surviving asthma and heat during the summer season is to spot the less obvious triggers and learn how to keep them at arm's length.

How Hot Weather Breeds Asthma Triggers

When heat and humidity combine, less air can be taken into the lungs, and that could lead to a lot of discomfort. But other things can tag along with the weather, triggers that can cause both allergic asthma reactions and systemic reactions (known as intrinsic asthma).

Keep an eye out for these common hot weather asthma irritants, so you can limit your chances of an attack:

Smog

Cities can become pockets of pollution in the summer, with irritating smog rising up and hovering for days. It should come as no surprise that the cloudy gray air contains a lot of irritants, and breathing it in for even a short amount of time can cause trouble for asthmatics.

Track the air quality with a reputed weather website or program, and don't wait for the smog to hit hazardous levels to retreat indoors; your breathing will likely begin to suffer well before the rest of population feels the effects.

Heat Stress

When the temperature soars, your body may not be able to cool itself fast enough to stay in a healthy zone. This condition is known as heat stress, and it can lead to a bumpy rash, cramps, dizziness, heat stroke and a worsening of existing medical conditions – including asthma.

You may find that your airways begin to constrict, and as the body struggles to cool itself, the demand for oxygen goes up, which stresses your lungs even more.

Mold

You may associate mold with dark, damp basements, but it can hide out almost anywhere with enough heat and humidity. Summer brings an inevitable increase in mold, especially in the nooks and crannies around the outside of your house, cottage, or shed. Old leaf piles and compost can be a hotbed for spores, so be careful working or playing around those areas.

Smoke

Cigarettes aren't the only smoky irritant out there. With summer comes campfires and barbecues, both of which release thick, toxic fumes into your breathing space. Also, wildfires tend to spring up suddenly in some areas, and the smoke and particles can travel very far, depending on the wind patterns. Try to keep in mind these sources of fire, and duck inside if you notice a change in the air quality.

Many people get more active when the warm, sunny weather begins, and that's generally fine. However, you may have to limit your strenuous exercise, or take your workout to an air-conditioned gym to avoid an unpleasant episode outside. If you exercise outdoors, be sure to bring along your rescue medication each and every time.

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Sidestepping Summer Breathing Trouble

The best way to keep your breathing under control is to set some smart limits: limit heat, limit humidity and limit exposure. Luckily, there are plenty of tools and methods at your disposal, so it shouldn't be too difficult to stay cool.

Control Your Inside Air

Air-conditioning and de-humidifiers can both be of service in the summer, but the key is to use them wisely. Extra cold, dry air can trigger an asthma attack just as easily as humidity can, so use the air-conditioning as often as you need it, but keep the temperature just cool enough to get relief.

Similarly, set your de-humidifier to keep the humidity between 35% and 50%, so you don't dry out your airways. It's important to keep both systems free of buildup: have a professional clean your air vents every year, and inspect your de-humidifier regularly for mold and mildew.

Limit Your Exertion

Rapidly breathing in air dries out the airway, and once the mucus membranes in your airways begin to dry out, allergens can invade. In turn, your body will release histamines that can increase inflammation in your airways.

Invest in a heart rate monitor if you have trouble controlling your pace when exercising or walking around. Alternatively, you can simply keep your mouth closed – If you can keep breathing through your nose, you're probably at a safe level of exertion.

Stay Vigilant With Hand Washing

Illness and viral infections are among the most common triggers of an asthma attack, and although lots of people associate sickness with cold, wet weather, that's a misconception. True, many viruses and bacteria can survive better in colder conditions, but plenty of pathogens are passed around in the summer months, and as always, poor hand washing habits are often to blame.

Wash your hands with soap and water as often as you would in "cold and flu season", especially after handling pets or chemical irritants, like bug spray.

Commit to Taking Your Medication

You should always have your rescue inhaler in case of emergency, but your daily preventative medication is what will keep you out of trouble. Keep taking your prescribed inhaler as your doctor has recommended, and have some backup medication with you if you go on vacation.

Since summertime can be full of distractions, it may be a good idea to keep your daily inhaler in plain sight so you don’t forget about it. Try placing it beside your toothbrush, so you remember to use it when you brush your teeth in the morning.

Planning and preparation can have a big impact on asthma management, so plan around the hottest, most humid parts of the day. Run most of your errands in the morning if you can, and try to stay in the shade or inside during the hottest hours of the day (usually from about 11 to 3). Swimming is great for keeping cool, active, and relaxed, which makes it an ideal way for you to enjoy the long, warm summer days.