The Pros and Cons of Using a Spacer When Taking Medications for Asthma

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Using a Spacer for Asthma Medication

If you have asthma, you likely have a Metered Dose Inhaler (MDI) which you use to take some of the medications which control and prevent asthma symptoms. Some MDI medications are best administered while using a spacer.

What Is a Spacer?

A spacer is a long tube or chamber which attaches to an inhaler. Spacers come in many shapes and sizes. They are most commonly attached to hand held inhalers. However, some spacers are designed to be used with masks. These are usually used for children and by people who need assistance taking their medication. Other names for spacers include spacing devices, aerosol-holding chambers, and add-on devices.

How Does a Spacer Work?

The medication from the inhaler is held in the chamber until you inhale. This slows down the delivery of the medication.

The Benefits of Using a Spacer

Here are some benefits which you may reap by employing the use of a spacer. Spacers are simple enough even for most children to use.

- By having additional time to inhale more fully, you are able to get more of the medication delivered into your lungs. A reduced amount of medication is wasted and you receive the full dose of medication which your health care provider orders. You will experience improved symptom management.
- Less medication is delivered in your mouth. You experience less of the foul taste which some inhaled medications possess.
- Another benefit of using a spacer is that spacer use reduces throat irritation. Irritation from inhaler use sometimes contributes to discomfort and the development of respiratory infections.
- Spacers make inhalers easier and more effective to use.

Are there any Drawbacks to Using a Spacer?

Yes, a spacer is one more piece of equipment which you need to carry if you bring your asthma medications with you when you are away from home. Fortunately, corticosteroids are most often prescribed to be administered once or twice daily, so you will not need to carry your spacer if you are away from home for just a part of the day. Some other drawbacks are:

- You need to learn how to use your spacer correctly.
- Spacers need to be kept clean.
- Not all asthma MDI medications are designed to be delivered via a spacer.
- If you have arthritis or other problems with your hands, shakiness, or coordination difficulties, you may find using a spacer is more difficult than simply using the MDI without one.

Most people find spacers simple to use. They consider the challenges minor when compared with the benefits which spacers provide.

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How Do I Know If I Need a Spacer?

If your medication is best delivered with a spacer, it is likely that one will be provided for you when you pick up your initial prescription of a medication. If you have inhalers which you have been using for an extended period of time, or if you are unsure of whether or not you need a spacer for a particular medication, ask your pharmacist or doctor. Only use a spacer if your health care professional has instructed you to. Spacers are recommended when using inhaled corticosteroids and some other asthma medications.

How do I use a Spacer?

1. Gather your equipment. You need your MDI and the spacer.
2. Vigorously shake your inhaler.
3. Remove the caps from your inhaler and spacer. (Not all spacers have caps.)
4. Attach the inhaler to the spacer.
5. Exhale.
6. Place the mouthpiece of the spacer between your teeth. Close your lips around the spacer.
7. Press the top of your inhaler.
8. Slowly, take a long deep breath in. Some spacers have a feature on them which makes a whistling sound if you breathe in too rapidly. Slow your breath down if needed.
9. Count to 10 mentally, while holding your breath. (Try saying 1 alligator, 2 alligator, etc mentally up to 10 if you are unsure how long 10 seconds is.) If you are unable to hold your breath for 10 seconds, simply hold it for as long as you can.
10. Exhale.
11. If you are to take more than one puff of the medication, repeat the procedure.

How to Keep Your Spacer Clean

Follow the instructions which the spacer manufacturer provides on the package insert. Here are some general guidelines which most manufacturers recommend.

- Remove the inhaler from the spacer.
- Take the spacer apart.
- Rinse the spacer in warm water. Move any movable parts while you are rinsing the spacer.
- Place the spacer on paper towel or rack.
- Allow the spacer to air dry.
- When it is completely dry, put the spacer back together.

Safe Use of Spacers

Here are some tips which will help you to safely obtain maximum benefits from your spacer.

- Follow the manufacturer’s recommendations for using and caring for the spacer. Keep the product insert

in an easily accessible location in case you need to refer to it in the future.
- Ask your health care provider to show you how to use your spacer correctly. Demonstrate how you use your spacer to your health care provider so that you can be sure you are using it correctly.
- Only use your spacer for the medications which your health care provider has instructed you to use it with.
- Spacers are used only with pressurized MDI medications, not powdered inhalant medications.
- Clean your spacer regularly.
- Do not share your spacer with others.
- Keep your spacer and asthma medications in a secure place, out of the reach of children.
- Store your spacer and medications at room temperature, away from heat sources.
- Maintain a current, easily accessible list of all of your medications. Note which ones require the use of a spacer.
- Do not use a damaged spacer. Obtain a replacement from your pharmacist.
- Consult with your health care provider if you have questions about your spacer, medications, or if you have an increase in asthma symptoms.

Using a spacer for asthma medication is easy and can help to deliver your medications more efficiently. As a result you may experience less difficulty breathing and feel better overall.