How to Control Your Asthma Symptoms for a Better Sleep

by ANGLEA FINLAY

Tips for Sleeping With Asthma

A good night's sleep is more important than most people realize. It's certainly nice to wake up with lots of energy, but that's only the tip of the iceberg: seven to nine hours of quality sleep every night can also help ward off heart disease and diabetes and keep your stress hormone levels down. Sleep is also vital for a strong immune system, which is your natural defense against asthma triggers and the key to preventing dangerous attacks.

Any respiratory trouble will certainly make it more difficult to fall asleep, but your asthma can jeopardize your health even if your breathing is under control when you hit the hay. In fact, most deaths tied to asthma symptoms occur during the night.

There are a variety of factors that could raise your risk of nighttime complications, from allergens to hormonal patterns, and while you may not be able to eliminate all those dangers, you can control them more effectively. Once you know which conditions and behaviors may be increasing your symptoms during the night, you can change your bedtime routine in helpful ways to counteract the problems.

The Dangers of Breathless Nights

Asthma symptoms that come on at night will naturally interfere with your sleep, especially if you can't get the chest tightness and breathlessness under control quickly. But consistently losing sleep can lead to a range of other sleep-related health problems that can, in turn, make your asthma symptoms worse.

In order to break the cycle, you need to appreciate the severity of the situation. When you suffer from asthma and poor sleep quality, you are far more prone to:

Exhaustion

Nobody is at their best when they've slept poorly, but sufferers can experience extreme fatigue with asthma, making it near impossible to keep up with daily tasks. The problem is that asthma consistently restricts your breathing, and restricted breathing limits the amount of oxygen that gets to your muscles and organs in the first place. Add to this a sleepless night and you'll get a double dose of exhaustion.

Sleep Apnea

This condition is not limited to those with respiratory conditions, but it can be more common — and more serious — when you live with asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Sleep apnea is when you stop breathing for several seconds at a time, and though it may not send you into a full-blown asthma attack, it is known to increase your need for rescue inhalers and decrease your quality of life throughout the day. Uncontrolled sleep apnea can also lead to cardiovascular conditions and stroke.

GERD

There is an undeniable link between asthma and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), the acid reflux condition that results in regular, severe heartburn. Asthmatics are more prone to developing GERD and the uncomfortable acid reflux symptoms tend to worsen asthma symptoms.

GERD also tends to get worse at night, which means it can lead to troubling nighttime asthma, too. Some people live with GERD for quite a while without a diagnosis or proper treatment, and that can strain on the airways and lungs as stomach acid begins to interfere with your respiratory tract.

Next page: strategies for handling nighttime symptoms and sleeping with asthma

How to Handle Nocturnal Symptoms

Dealing with asthma symptoms while you're awake and alert may not be easy, but at least you're able to respond quickly and precisely. Asthma that strikes in the night is a different story: when you're awoken by wheezing, coughing and breathlessness, it can be frightening, your sleep quality will suffer, and your energy levels will fall. The outcome can be even worse if you don't wake up at the first sign of distress.

Luckily, smart bedtime rituals and a few adjustments to your sleep hygiene can help you get the shut-eye you need to regenerate your cells and maintain your immune system.

Adjust Your Sleeping Position

Since your body already has to work harder at night to make up for the natural decline in your respiratory drive, work with gravity to make things easier for yourself. Many people find that propping up their head and shoulders a bit more than usual can make it easier to breathe, help drain congested sinuses, and defend against aggravating acid reflux.

Instead of a pile of pillows, consider using a specially-designed sleep wedge to keep your torso in a straight line, which will protect your neck and spine from undue pressure.

Address Other Discomforts

Heartburn and nasal congestion can provoke sleep apnea and interfere with your natural circadian rhythms by preventing the deep sleep you need. So, get to the root of the problem by treating persistent sinus problems and getting the right diagnosis and medication to control GERD.

Be careful about what you eat and drink in the evening, too, since that can play a role in digestive distress and metabolism. Remember that alcohol is notorious for interfering with sleep, whether or not you have a medical condition.

Keep up With Your Medications

Worsening nighttime asthma can mean you're not using your asthma control medications as often or appropriately as you should. Daytime inhalers are important to fight inflammation and keep your body in a healthy state, but they may not be the sole solution.

Talk to your doctor about which medication to take before bedtime to best relieve inflammation and relax your bronchial muscles. A long-acting bronchodilator may be your best bet for sounder sleep.

Control Your Sleep Environment

Allergens and dry air are two top triggers for asthma, so take steps to improve the air and accessories in your

bedroom. First, get rid of clutter — it collects dust and is difficult to keep clean — and opt for hypoallergenic pillows and duvets over feathers. Dust mites are difficult to eradicate, but once you remove their favorite haunts you'll begin to notice a difference.

Nothing is more important than the air you breathe, so keep it as clean and fresh as possible. You may feel like the cool air from an open window will help you sleep, but outside allergens can have the opposite effect.

Instead, use a humidifier that can keep your room between 35 and 50 percent humidity. The more pressure you take off your lungs, the more likely you'll overcome your nocturnal symptoms and get on track to healthier and happier days.