

Asthma Triggers

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Asthma Triggers

Some or all the triggers listed below may be important in an individual patient, and the effects of each add up with the others to provoke a flare-up:

(1) ALLERGY - Sudden asthma attacks can be caused by exposure to allergens, materials to which a patient has an allergy. They can also make asthma worse on a chronic basis. The main purpose of allergy testing is to identify these troublemakers so that they may be avoided. A strong association with allergy is common in children with asthma, but only about 50% of adults with asthma are allergic. Sometimes allergy shots, or immunotherapy, will be recommended to desensitize the patient to allergens that are hard to avoid. The patient with asthma should never get an allergy shot when they are feeling ill from their asthma.

Food and food additives are an extraordinarily rare allergic trigger for asthma. If foods or additives are suspected as asthma triggers, this should be discussed in detail with your physician.

(2) PETS - Patients with asthma should not own birds. The feather dust, which all birds make, is a non-allergic cause of bronchial irritation and inflammation. Asthma patients who own birds should find a new home for their birds.

In general, warm-blooded pets should also be avoided. Animal danders can be both an allergic and a non-specific cause of asthma. Certainly no new pets should be added to the family, and existing pets should optimally remain outdoors.

(3) RESPIRATORY INFECTIONS - Colds, flu, and sinus infection are common triggers of asthma which may cause an increase in symptoms for days or even weeks. These are treated by increasing the use of inhaled bronchodilators, and often with short courses of oral steroids. Influenza can be avoided by a yearly flu shot. We recommend most asthma patients receive a flu shot each fall when it is first available.

(4) EXERCISE - Some patients have asthma only after exercise. Most patients with frequent asthma also have exercise-induced asthma (EIA). This typically begins 5-10 minutes after aerobic type activity. Swimming is less likely to cause an attack. In those patients with recurrent EIA it is best to prevent attacks with an inhaled bronchodilator or cromolyn ten minutes before exercise. The patient with asthma should be encouraged to participate in athletics, even if it requires added use of inhaled bronchodilators. Many of the athletes on the US Olympic teams have asthma. While any asthma patient can experience EIA, almost all patients with well-controlled asthma should have no problems with routine activities such as walking, jogging, or stair climbing.

(5) IRRITANTS - Smoke, smog, pollution, and strong fumes or odors are particularly irritating to the asthmatic patient and may trigger an attack. Redwood and cedar saw dust contains chemicals that can cause wheezing and should be avoided. Every effort and

consideration should be made to eliminate tobacco smoke exposure. Smoke from a fireplace and wood-burning stoves can be worse than tobacco smoke for asthma patients. Cigarette smoking should not be allowed inside the home or car of asthma patients. All smokers should go outside to smoke.

(6) HEIGHTENED EMOTION - Laughing, crying, or simply a strong emotional reaction may trigger an asthma attack. However, patients with well-controlled asthma should have no problems with interpersonal relationships.

(7) RAPID WEATHER CHANGES - These are associated with asthma flare-ups in some patients, particularly when a cold or rainy weather front is present. Again, most patients with well-controlled asthma should have no problems with weather changes.

(8) ASPIRIN - A significant portion of asthmatic patients experience a severe flare after taking aspirin or related drugs (Advil®, Motrin®, Naprosyn®, Aleve®, etc.). About 20% have measurable drops in pulmonary function without obvious symptoms. Therefore, it is best for all asthma patients to avoid all these medications and take Tylenol unless instructed otherwise by a doctor.

(9) HUMIDIFIERS - Although many physicians and patients think humidifiers help symptoms, they can actually make asthma worse due to the molds and bacteria sprayed into the air. If they are used, they must be cleaned with bleach twice a week.

(10) GASTROESOPHAGEAL REFLUX (GER) - GER is an illness found in many patients with asthma. GER is also known by other names, such as acid reflux, hiatal hernia, and gastritis. The symptoms include frequent heartburn or stomachache, increased burping and belching, and an acid taste in the mouth. Some patients may have no symptoms other than severe nighttime asthma. Unfortunately, some asthma medications make reflux worse. If indicated, your doctor will outline a treatment plan for reflux.