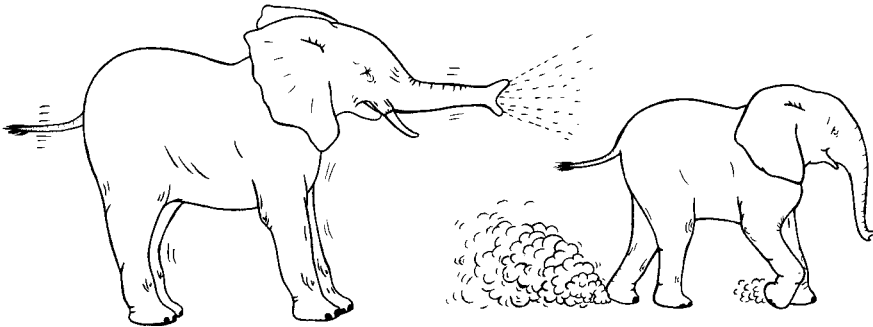


2

Symptoms and triggers of asthma



In this chapter you will learn about:

- asthma symptoms
- how asthma symptoms make your asthma worse
- asthma triggers
- how asthma triggers make your asthma worse
- other conditions that may have an effect on your asthma.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of asthma?

The main symptoms of asthma are:

- **Coughing.** When the airways are irritable and sensitive (twitchy), this irritation can make you cough. The coughing is often worse at night.
- **Wheezing.** When the airways in the lungs become tight, they narrow in size. This makes it more difficult to breathe out normally and air has to be forced out instead. If air is forced out of the lungs through narrowed airways, it causes a high pitched squeaky or whistling noise known as wheezing.
- **Chest tightness.** When the airways become narrow, it can give you the feeling that there is something tight around the chest, and this makes breathing uncomfortable. It can be quite painful too and, because of this, you may think something is wrong with your heart, but asthma does not affect the heart in this way.
- **Shortness of breath.** When the airways are tight, breathing is harder than normal and results in shortness of breath, especially on exertion.

Why is my asthma worse at night?

Nobody knows the answer to this question for sure. It is fair to say that most things seem to be worse at night – from toothache to anxiety.

We do know that, when we are asleep, the airways are more relaxed and they become slightly floppy. That means that there is less air going in and out of the lungs as we breathe. We know this because, if you do peak flow blowing tests first thing in the morning, you will find that the readings are slightly lower than they are in the evening. This is quite normal and happens even if you do not

have asthma. As well as the airways becoming relaxed at night, some of the 'body rhythm' hormones that our body produces are lower and so we function more slowly.

If your asthma is not under control, asthma symptoms of coughing or wheezing are worse at night and can wake you up. They may disturb others in your family too, even if they do not disturb you! Talk to your asthma nurse or doctor about any night-time asthma symptoms because they may be able to suggest treatment changes that will help to get your asthma under better control.

Why does my chest feel tight?

Wheezing is only one of the symptoms of asthma and we know that some people hardly ever wheeze. The other main symptoms are coughing and shortness of breath. Chest tightness, such as you describe, is another common symptom. Asthma causes narrowing of the airways in three ways:

- mucus (phlegm) inside the airways
- thickening (swelling) of the walls of the airways
- muscle contraction (tightening) in the walls of the airways.
(See Figure 1.2 in the previous chapter.)

This narrowing of the airways causes wheezing, but some people report little or no wheezing if airway narrowing is minimal. In mild asthma there is often just a persistent dry cough, or some shortness of breath on exertion.

When I had a bad asthma attack my doctor said he couldn't hear any wheezing. What did he mean by that?

There is an entirely different occasion in asthma where no wheeze may be heard at all. During a bad asthma attack (also known as an *acute* severe asthma attack), if your airways are very tight, it is very difficult for air to get into or out of your lungs. This means that the wheezing noise of air forcing its way through narrow airway tubes cannot be heard when your doctor or asthma nurse listens

to your chest with a stethoscope. In a bad asthma attack this lack of wheezing is known as a *silent chest*. If this occurs, the person having the bad asthma attack may look blue (you can see that their lips or tongue are blue), because it means that their blood does not have enough oxygen. This is a life-threatening situation and urgent medical help is needed. Phone the emergency services (dial 999 in the UK) immediately for help and tell them the person is having a severe asthma attack.

As asthma is a lung condition, why is it that my throat seems to close so that I feel as if I’m being strangled?

Your lungs contain thousands of air passages, which range in size from the main windpipe (trachea) starting in the throat to the smallest airways, the bronchioles, which empty into the air spaces, the alveoli (see Figure 1.1 in the previous chapter). Asthma affects all of these air passages to some degree. In the majority of people it is the smaller air passages deep inside the lungs that are most affected. However, in some people – like you – it affects mainly the larger ones, even up to the trachea, and this is why you have a sensation of being strangled during an attack. Not only is this very unpleasant for you, but it tends to be slower to respond to treatment than the more common form.

Can I get rid of my asthma symptoms?

It is not possible to get rid of your asthma but it is certainly possible to get rid of your symptoms so that your asthma is under control: this is what you and your asthma doctor or nurse should aim for. If you are having continuing symptoms, your doctor will review and reassess your asthma medicines. Symptoms are not ‘normal’ or ‘to be expected’ but are a sign of incomplete asthma control. It is essential not only to be prescribed the right treatment, but also to take it regularly! You must be able to use your inhaler device correctly too! Your asthma nurse or doctor can check this when you attend for an asthma review. Your pharmacist may also be able to help.

My son experienced a rash while suffering an asthmatic cough. Is this rare and are the two connected?

People do occasionally complain of itching when they have a flare-up of their asthma. However, we are not aware of any relationship between an asthma cough and a rash. There may be several explanations, but one of the commonest complications of any treatment with medicines is a skin rash. Exact figures are difficult to obtain, but it is known that about 3 in every 100 people who take medicines will develop a medicine-related rash. If your son was taking a different treatment for his cough at the time the rash developed, then this could be the cause, rather than his asthma. Some chest infections are also known to cause a temporary rash as well as make the asthma worse. This is particularly true of viral chest infections (similar to the common cold) in children.

Another possibility is that your son has atopic eczema. This is a skin inflammation that occurs in people who have an inherited tendency towards allergic problems. It often co-exists with other allergic conditions, especially asthma and hay fever. It is not uncommon for eczema to flare up at the same time as an episode of asthma.

What causes the chest pain I get when my asthma is bad?

There are three main causes of chest pain during uncontrolled asthma. These all occur as a result of stretching in the chest and any or all of them may be the cause of your pain.

- During an asthma attack the lungs expand greatly, because a lot of air becomes trapped in them. The *pleura* (which are membranes surrounding the lungs) stretch as a result, and this may cause pain.
- The walls of the chest stretch due to the overexpansion of the lungs. This causes strain on the rib joints (where the ribs join the breastbone, and at the back where they join the spine). This can also cause pain.
- The muscles between the ribs are stretched when the lungs are overexpanded, and this may be a third cause of the pain.