How Acid Reflux Complicates Asthma and What You Can Do About It

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Managing the Combination of Asthma and GERD

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) isn't exactly an uncommon illness — about 30% of Americans have weekly bouts of heartburn, the principle symptom — but those with asthma are at a considerably higher risk. Doctors report that around 75% of asthmatics also suffer from GERD, which makes them more than twice as vulnerable as the rest of the population.

If you are one of the unlucky people who live with both conditions, rest assured that you can get relief. It's important that you tweak your management plan to treat both the GERD and asthma: first learn what they may have in common and how they differ, then take steps to ease the irritation with gentle lifestyle changes and targeted medicine.

The Reciprocal Relationship between GERD and Asthma

There's no clear consensus as to why the two diseases so often come together, but experts suspect that each disease can create the conditions for the other to flare up.

Acid Can Interfere With Airways

As acid backs up into the esophagus, it can damage the lining of the throat and airways, and eventually, strain the lungs. Initially, the effects may be mild – some shortness of breath and throat irritation – but in time, a chronic cough could develop.

Chronic reflux may also trigger a nerve response that causes the esophagus and airways to narrow in an attempt to keep acid from entering the throat. When this happens, you may struggle to inhale deeply, or feel breathless and wheezy.

Asthma Treatment Can Trigger Reflux

Certain common asthma medications, namely theophylline and bronchodilators, are known to cause acid reflux. These can interfere with the pressure of the esophageal sphincter (LES), the mechanism that keeps the stomach acid from moving back up into the esophagus.

Asthma and GERD are very different disorders, although sometimes they are mistaken for each other. If your asthma isn't responding well to conventional medicine, or you begin to develop symptoms in adulthood, your doctor should check to see if chronic acid reflux is at play.

Next page: treating GERD fo manage asthma symptoms.

Treating GERD to Manage Asthma Symptoms

Since GERD seems to directly impact the frequency and severity of asthma symptoms, it follows that you can reduce your asthma discomforts by treating your stomach acid problem. Luckily, there are several ways to quickly relieve GERD in the comfort of your own home:

- **Change your sleep position**. You can buy a specially designed wedge to prop up your body in bed, which will help keep acid in the stomach where it belongs. The idea is to evenly elevate your upper body; using a stack of pillows will keep your head up but may compress your abdomen, which will make heartburn worse.
- **Adjust your diet**. Certain foods are known to weaken the LES, which allows stomach acid to move back up. Start by eliminating chocolate, coffee, alcohol, peppermint, and fried foods – all of these can trigger reflux. Also, it's best to eat meals at least three hours prior to lying down
- **Drop extra pounds.** The amount of food you eat can affect GERD in a few different ways. First, portion size matters: the bigger your plate of food, the more you'll fill your stomach, and the more likely you'll have reflux. However, the longer you overeat, the more weight you'll put on, and being overweight will worsen your symptoms by putting more pressure on the stomach.
- **Quit smoking.** Cigarette smoke is known for its irritating qualities, so it should come as no surprise that it can interfere with digestive processes, too. Smoking will wreak havoc on your asthma symptoms, but will also weaken the LES over time, making breathing even more uncomfortable.
- **Treat with medication.** A simple antacid can be enough to reduce your acid reflux to a tolerable level, but it may not relieve the discomfort completely. Some people find more relief when they combine an antacid with a foaming agent, to create a barrier over the top of the stomach. But while they can be helpful here and there, long-term use can bring side effects.

Severe cases of GERD may call for more invasive treatment. Certain prescription medications, like H2 blockers and proton pump inhibitors, can reduce the amount of acid produced in the stomach, which will (hopefully) stop the problem before it begins. In the worst cases, you might need surgery to increase pressure in the lower esophagus and control the reflux – but this is only considered after medication has failed.

Stick to Your Treatment Plan

Heartburn may seem like a mild discomfort, and your asthma may not flare up too frequently, but when you suffer from both conditions, your symptoms can get out of hand before you know it. Left untreated, GERD can cause permanent scarring in your throat, even leading to esophageal ulcers or cancer. Likewise, untreated asthma can lead to worsening symptoms and dangerous exacerbations that could put your life at risk.

The best way to stay on a healthy track is to take any and all medications your doctor has prescribed, exactly as prescribed. If you have daily medications, make it a top priority to never miss a day. Finally, be sure to avoid any GERD or asthma triggers, whether they are certain foods, bad habits, or environmental irritants. Luckily, the undeniable connection between asthma and GERD means if you effectively control one, you stand a good chance of managing the other.