

Dealing with Asthma in Winter Weather

Asthma is a chronic disease affecting more than twenty million children and adults in America. It is likely that some of the individuals you support may have asthma. Asthma can affect people throughout the year, but winter weather can make it harder to manage the symptoms.

What is asthma?

When you breathe, air goes to your lungs through airways or breathing tubes. Asthma is a chronic disease that causes these airways to become inflamed and narrow, making it hard to breathe. The inflammation makes the airways more sensitive to things that irritate the lungs, especially things you are allergic to. When the airways react, they get narrower and less air flows through to your lungs. You can compare asthma to breathing through a straw – with less space for the air to go through, it becomes harder for air to move in and out of the lungs, which causes shortness of breath, breathing problems, and other symptoms.

Asthma symptoms can range from mild to severe, and often occur in episodes or attacks. Symptoms include:

- Coughing
- Trouble breathing
- A tight or painful feeling in the chest
- A whistling or hissing sound when breathing (called wheezing)

Anyone can get asthma. Asthma usually starts in children between 2 to 6 years old, but can also develop in adults. Some people who are more likely to get asthma include:

- People who had asthma or wheezing as a child
- People with a family history of asthma
- People with allergies
- People frequently exposed to irritants, such as smoke, pollutants, or chemicals
- People with frequent respiratory infections
- People with eczema, which is another type of allergy affecting the skin

What causes asthma attacks?

Asthma attacks can be triggered by allergic reactions. They can also be caused by things that irritate the lungs. Each person with asthma has his or her own unique set of triggers. Most triggers cause attacks in some people with asthma and not in others. Common triggers of asthma attacks are the following:

Allergies	Irritants
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Seasonal pollen and mold• Dust• Pet dander• Food – such as milk, eggs, peanuts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tobacco/Wood smoke• Physical exertion/Exercise• Weather changes• Outdoor air pollution – such as smog,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chemicals – such as latex 	<p>exhaust fumes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indoor air pollution – such as detergents, perfume, fireplace smoke • Emotional responses – such as stress, anxiety, laughing, crying • Medicines – such as aspirin • Respiratory infections – such as colds, flu, sinus infections • Cold/dry weather • GERD – gastroesophageal reflux disease • Menstruation • Sulfites in foods or wine
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How can asthma be managed?

There is no cure for asthma, but there are many things that people with asthma can do to manage the disease and lead healthy lives. As a direct support professional, you can encourage people with asthma to talk with their doctor about how to stay healthy and manage their asthma with an asthma action plan. This plan should include instructions on what to do when an asthma attack occurs, when to call the health care provider, and when to go to a hospital emergency room. You can also learn about asthma yourself so you can help individuals with asthma with their daily activities.

A doctor can prescribe medication to help manage asthma. There are two kinds of asthma medications:

- Emergency relief medication (usually an inhaler) – When an asthma attack occurs, this type of medication quickly opens up airways.
- Medications taken daily (by inhaler or pills) – People take these medications to prevent asthma attacks by making airways less sensitive to attack triggers.

Make sure both you and the individuals you support know when and how to properly take their asthma medication and how to use an inhaler.

How can I prepare for an asthma attack?

Most asthma attacks don't stop on their own, so you need to act quickly. By planning ahead for asthma attacks, you can be ready to treat attacks as soon as they occur.

1. Know the warning signs and symptoms of an asthma attack.

The individuals who you support may not be able to communicate the symptoms they are experiencing. You can observe changes in their behavior that may indicate an asthma attack. In some cases it can be hard to detect a change. The people who you support are relying on you to notice changes in their behavior and their bodies and to ensure that they receive the treatment that they need to get better. Be especially aware of:

- Inability to speak or walk normally without shortness of breath
- Inability to sleep because of persistent coughing or wheezing
- Changing posture, such as sitting or standing, in order to breathe more easily
- Confusion or inability to concentrate
- Hunched shoulders and difficulty breathing
- Blue lips

2. Monitor breathing.

Be aware of changes in the way the individuals you support are breathing. Ask a doctor about using a “peak flow meter” – a device that measures how well someone’s lungs are working. An individual can blow into the peak flow meter and measure how much air their lungs push out. If the individual is having trouble blowing out air, this may mean that an asthma attack is coming.

3. Know how to respond in an emergency.

Keep an inhaler with you at all times so you can always be prepared to treat an asthma attack quickly. If quick relief medication does not work, call 911. A mechanical ventilator may be necessary to help the individual breathe normally.

How can I help the people I support manage their asthma?

As a direct support professional, the best thing you can do is to make sure that the individuals you support understand and follow all of their doctors’ instructions. You can also help them develop their own plan to manage their asthma.

1. Identify the things that trigger asthma attacks.

Whenever an asthma attack occurs, you can find clues to help determine what causes the attacks. By recording the circumstances surrounding an asthma attack, you can discover the pattern of triggers that can lead to an attack for an individual. You can ask the people you support questions such as:

- When do your asthma attacks typically happen?
 - At night? In the winter?
- Where were you when the attack happened?
 - Outdoors? In bed? In a smoky room?
- What activities did you do the day of the attack?
 - Playing with a pet? Eating? Exercising?
- How were you feeling before the attack?
 - Upset? Anxious? Angry? Calm?

You and the individuals you support can use this worksheet to figure out what triggers their asthma:

http://www.ddssafety.net/sites/default/files/Tool_Asthma%20Trigger_ENGLISH.pdf

2. Help them avoid allergens and irritants that trigger their asthma.

- Keep indoor spaces clean by dusting and vacuuming often.
- Use air filters and air conditioning to keep indoor air clean.
- Keep a list of things each individual is allergic to.

- Help prevent colds, the flu, and other respiratory illnesses.
3. Suggest other activities to enrich their lives while managing their asthma.
- Find physical activities they can enjoy that do not overwork the lungs, such as a walk around the neighborhood.
 - Reduce stress by assisting them to manage their schedule and time.
 - Talk to others about their feelings to help control strong emotions.

How does the winter weather affect asthma?

The winter season can bring certain problems in managing asthma. Cold, dry air is an irritant that can trigger asthma attacks. You can remind individuals to:

- Drink lots of liquids to prevent the airways from becoming too dry.
- When they go outdoors, wear a scarf or facemask over the nose and mouth to warm the air they breathe.

In particular, exercising or engaging in physical activity in the cold weather can trigger asthma attacks. You can support individuals by planning physical activities that are easy to do during the winter, such as:

- Swimming indoors in a heated pool
- Walking indoors, like in a shopping mall
- Household chores, such as vacuuming
- Playing with children
- Taking an aerobics or yoga class
- Listening to music and dancing
- Using the stairs instead of the elevator
- Stretching or doing light exercises while watching TV

You can ask a doctor for ideas of appropriate exercises and activities. Also, spending more time indoors can increase the risk of catching respiratory illnesses. You can support healthy habits to prevent catching colds and flu which can trigger asthma attacks.

Where can I find resources about living with asthma to share with those I support?

The best way to learn more is by talking to a doctor. You can ask a health care professional or your local Regional Center if they have materials that you can use to teach people with developmental disabilities about asthma.

The DDS Safety Net (www.ddssafety.net) is a great source of information that you can share with individuals who you support. Check out these presentations:

- Dealing with Asthma in Winter Weather – <http://www.ddssafety.net/health/asthma/dealing-asthma-winter-weather-0>
- Understanding Allergic Reactions – <http://www.ddssafety.net/health/allergies/understanding-allergic-reactions>

- Preventing Infections –
<http://www.ddssafety.net/preventing-infections>
- Understanding Respiratory Illnesses –
<http://www.ddssafety.net/health/cold-and-flu/understanding-respiratory-illnesses-0>

You can also check out these other resources on the Internet:

- Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America – Asthma Overview
<http://www.aafa.org/display.cfm?id=8&cont=5>
- Mayo Clinic – Asthma
<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/asthma/DS00021>