

Asthma and Hay Fever

by Shannon Mooney

The spring season marks the beginning of allergy season for many people. It is also the time of year when the accumulated kapha from winter begins to liquefy due to warmer temperatures and increased activity. So, not only are we plagued with an overall increase in mucus trying to clear itself from the body, but an increase in airborne irritants can lead to a reactive bronchial system resulting in other discomforting symptoms.

Asthma is a condition consisting of recurrent attacks or shortness of breath, wheezing, and cough with expectoration of mucus. Hay fever typically consists of watery nasal discharge, itchy eyes and nose, and sneezing, and is usually associated with a particular season.

In the United States, there is a rapid increase in the rate of diagnosing asthma, particularly among children. Many reasons may explain this increase including: an increase in the number of environmental chemical pollutants in the air, water, and food; an increase in the use of food additives; and for infants earlier weaning or earlier introduction to solid food.

Hay fever and asthma have similar causal factors and pathogenic tendencies in the body. Allergens can contribute to both of these conditions. The more allergens present, the more intense the reaction of the body. The severity of the response to allergens is also dependent on the nature of each individual's system and how hypersensitive or overloaded with toxins it is. Though asthma is generally broken into two categories, extrinsic (an allergic reaction where there is an increase in allergic antibody) and intrinsic (a reaction to a toxic chemical, cold air, exercise, infection) the physiology of the reactions is very similar.

Ayurvedic therapeutic treatment is relatively the same for both conditions. Using natural methods of improving diet and lifestyle, such as taking herbs and practicing yoga can greatly reduce or even eliminate attacks of asthma and hay fever. In acute asthmatic conditions Ayurveda can be used complementarily (with Western medical treatment) to help reduce symptoms and improve the body's immune response.

The first step in treating asthma and hay fever is to reduce the allergic threshold by avoiding both airborne and food allergens. Removing the cause is not always easy, particularly when the allergen may be prevalent in the outside environment. Indoor environments are much easier to control thanks to HEPA air filters, various anti-allergen bedding materials, carpet removal and cleaning with non-toxic, non-fragrance cleaners.

Reduce food allergens by eliminating processed foods, particularly foods that contain additives, preservatives and food colorings. If a food allergy is suspected, an elimination diet may be the most effective tool to improve health and eliminate the offending allergen. (This is usually the easiest way to treat children.) Common food allergens are soy, wheat, corn, dairy, eggs, shellfish, nuts and citrus. Reducing the allergen load in your diet will improve digestion and strengthen your immune function to better protect against allergies.

Diet

An Ayurvedic diet is a healthy one, rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables. For the general treatment of asthma and hay fever, follow a kapha pacifying diet, favoring foods that are light and drying.

Here are some other general considerations:

- Eliminate dairy products which are typically mucus-forming, particularly cheese and ice cream.
- Limit alcohol consumption. Many types of alcoholic drinks contain sulfites, a common allergen. Alcohol can also impair immune function.
- Increase fruits and vegetables rich in antioxidants, particularly vitamin C.
- Limit salt intake. Several studies, like the one done in 2005 by researchers at Indiana University, have found a higher reactivity of the bronchial membranes when salt intake is high.
- Sip hot ginger tea throughout the day to aid digestion and help to cleanse the body of toxins.

Lifestyle

Herbal steams can do wonders for clearing up congested sinuses. Try adding a couple drops of eucalyptus oil to a bowl of boiling hot water. Put a towel over your head. Lean over the bowl and inhale the steam for several minutes.

Neti is a process of cleansing and purifying the nasal passages with a nasal rinse cup and warm water or saline solution. This practice can be extremely beneficial for people with asthma, allergies or sinus problems. This can be done several times throughout the day and brings immediate relief.

Yoga

When the body is tight and stiff, you will have more difficulty breathing than when the body is open and relaxed. The practice of yoga allows the muscles and joints of the body to become more mobile. The tissues become more fluid and supple allowing the body to receive full nourishment of the breath. Poses that directly target the lung area, such as Camel and Bow, are effective in opening the chest and intercostals muscles. When your ribs are able to move better, your lungs will be able to fill with more air.

Yoga can also help to improve posture. Poor posture can be a contributing factor of an asthmatic condition, making diaphragmatic breathing difficult.

The adrenals also play a vital role in protecting the body from asthmatic conditions. The hormones cortisol and epinephrine activate receptors which lead to relaxation of the bronchial muscle and opening of the airways. Child's pose is an effective yoga pose to tonify the adrenal glands.

Pranayama

Practicing deep yogic breathing helps to cleanse and exercise the entire respiratory system. Many times in asthmatic conditions, abnormal breathing habits can create tension within the respiratory muscles. This is why pranayama is best practiced after yoga or meditation when the body is open and relaxed. The key for asthmatics is to strengthen diaphragmatic breathing. Simply bringing awareness to the breath for several minutes can help to slow the breathing rate, increase lung capacity and calm the nervous system.

Here is a simple practice to help strengthen the respiratory muscles and promote healthy breathing:

- Recline comfortably on a blanket.
- Breathe normally and allow the body to relax.
- Place the hands, fingers spread wide, on either side of the rib cage providing a slight resistance.
- On inhalation, begin to direct and expand your breath into your rib cage, expanding the ribs outwards, into the pressure of your hands.
- With exhalation, allow the ribs (and fingers) to move closer together.
- Providing resistance with the hands will engage the diaphragm and intercostal muscles.
- Continue for 10 breath cycles.
- Be sure that you are not holding tension in your face, neck or back. Allow the breath to move as smoothly and as naturally as possible.
- Rest with your arms at your sides and breathe normally for 10 breath cycles.

Meditation

Though it may be difficult to try meditating while experiencing the distracting and persistent symptoms of an allergic condition, it may offer some peace to your daily life. Meditation can help reduce stress levels and curb emotional upset, a possible trigger for asthmatic conditions. Try sitting for meditation during the time of day when symptoms are most mild. The calming and relaxing effect of meditation helps to regulate breathing patterns and improve respiratory function.

Particularly when practiced with yoga and pranayama, meditation can be an effective tool in addressing suppressed emotions. It is common for asthmatics to have a need to address a psychological component regarding not having enough "room to breathe" or lacking support or freedom to express themselves. Meditation is a way to give space to an individual, allowing emotions or feelings to come to light.