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IF IT'S NOT ASTHMA, THEN WHAT IS IT? by Dr. Peter LaPine, PhD

Shortness of breath, a wheeze, and a chronic cough are familiar signs of asthma. But, not all breathing problems are caused by asthma. It may be Vocal Cord Dysfunction (VCD). Vocal cord dysfunction is caused when the vocal cords do not open and close normally. This makes it hard to breathe air in and out.

With asthma, the airways become inflamed or swollen. The airways also make extra mucus. Both the swelling and mucus make it hard for air to travel through the lungs. This makes it very hard to breathe. The signs of asthma include shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing, cough lasting more than a week and coughing during the night or after exercise. Asthma episodes usually make it harder to breathe out than to breathe in.

Your vocal cords are deep in your throat at the top of the windpipe (trachea). Breathing in and out makes the vocal cords open to let air flow from the lungs through the windpipe. The cords vibrate when air is exhaled to produce noise and voice. With VCD, the vocal cords do not open all the way, either when breathing in or out. This leaves just a small opening for the air to move through which makes it hard to breathe. In some cases, breathing in will also cause a high-pitched sound called stridor. The symptoms of VCD include shortness of breath, hoarseness, wheezing (a whistling sound when you breathe), chronic cough, throat clearing, and tightness in the throat or upper chest.

The signs and triggers for VCD and asthma are similar which makes detecting VCD harder. To make it even more confusing, VCD can occur with asthma in 50% of patients. It is important that a person who is having trouble breathing talk to their doctor. Even though it's hard, the patient should try to notice what happens when they breathe in and out and describe it to the doctor. To make a diagnosis, the doctor may do breathing tests or use a special instrument to look at the vocal cords. The treatments for asthma and VCD are very different so the correct diagnosis is important.

Speech-language pathology (speech therapy) can help diagnose and treat a person with VCD. Learning how to control coughs and new ways to clear the throat can also be helpful. If asthma is present, the asthma treatment will need to continue, but should be reviewed to see if the treatment can be reduced.

For more information, please see the National Jewish Medical and Research Center website on Vocal Cord Dysfunction (<http://www.nationaljewish.org/disease-info/diseases/vcd/index.aspx>). *

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Here are some key differences between VCD and asthma:

VCD Symptoms:

- * The throat (and/or upper-chest) feels tight.
- * A high pitched sound (stridor) is made when breathing in.
- * Inhalers and/or other medicines do not make symptoms go away.

Asthma Symptoms:

- * Wheezing when breathing out.
- * Waking up in the night with trouble breathing.
- * Inhalers and/or other medicines will help symptoms.

ASK AN ASTHMA EDUCATOR



Guest AE-C, Jan Roberts,
RN, AE-C

I am concerned about my asthma medication. I heard recently that some medications could cause side effects. Are asthma medications safe for my family and me?

It can be very confusing and frightening when you hear reports on the news about side effects. But you should know that most medications carry the risk of some side effects, even aspirin.

When your doctor prescribed asthma medicines for you and your family, it was to help you feel and breathe better. Adverse side effects are very rare. Your doctor compared the small risks of taking the correct asthma medications and the risk of having a serious asthma episode. Sometimes, you may have a few side effects like a sore throat, nervousness, nausea, rapid heartbeat, loss of appetite, or trouble sleeping. But, uncontrolled asthma can result in missed days from school and work, hospitalization, or asthma death.

It's important that you talk with your doctor about your concerns and any side effects that you may be experiencing while taking the medication. You should never stop or alter the way you take your medications without first talking to your doctor!

Your doctor may decide to try a different asthma medication or change your dosage. There are many different asthma medications available. Your doctor will help find one that works best for you.

Above all, your asthma medications are supposed to help you control your symptoms. *

Lace up your walking shoes and march against asthma on May 17th. To find a Blow the Whistle on Asthma Walk near you, call 1-800-Lung USA or visit www.asthmawalk.org



Please direct questions and comments about this newsletter to:
MI Asthma Communication Network
c/o American Lung Assoc. of Michigan
403 Seymour Avenue
Lansing, MI 48933-1179
phone: 1-866-395-8647
e-mail: info@GetAsthmaHelp.org

SPRING ASTHMA TIPS: Spring Cleaning and Asthma

In order to manage your asthma, it is important to keep your home free of triggers, like dust and mold. But, if you use commercial spray home cleaning products, you might be making your asthma worse. Commercial cleaning products often contain irritants that can trigger an asthma episode. In the October 2007 issue of the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*, scientists noticed that regular use of certain harsh cleaning products and air fresheners may increase your asthma risk. More research is needed, but there is plenty that you can do to protect yourself and your family.



* **Try a new non-toxic cleaning product.** There are several brands of mild cleaners available at your local grocery or department store.

* **Make your own cleaners.** With a few common ingredients like baking soda, vinegar, castile soap, and a spray bottle, you can make your own effective household cleaners that are better for your family and the environment.

Visit <http://www.thegreenguide.com/doc/120/diy> to learn how to make your own non-toxic cleaning products.

CLEAN AND GREEN

Making your own cleaning products is easier than you think! Here are a few non-toxic cleaning recipes to try out in your home. Don't forget! Certain products, like bleach and ammonia, should not be mixed together!

Wood Floors

- * 1/4 cup white vinegar
 - * 1 gallon warm water
- Mix in mop bucket. Rinse afterwards.

Linoleum Floors

- * 1 cup white vinegar
 - * 2 gallons warm water
- Mix in mop bucket. Rinse afterwards.

All-Purpose Cleaner

- * Liquid castile soap
- For woodwork, tile and linoleum, add a few drops of liquid soap to a wet washcloth and rub surface briskly. Rinse and wipe thoroughly.

MI ASTHMA CALENDAR

April

- 24- Asthma Educator Institute
- 25 Holiday Inn - French Quarter, Perrysburg, OH, registration fee, must pre-register, for more info: 419-663-5864, ext. 22 or <http://www.ohiolung.org/workshops-asthma.htm>

May

- 17 American Lung Association of Michigan Asthma Walks
Detroit, Grand Blanc, Grand Rapids, & Lansing, 8 a.m. - 12 p.m. for more info: www.asthmawalk.org
- 10 Asthma Screening and Education Day
Ann Arbor District Library, Ann Arbor, 10 a.m. - 1 p.m., for more info: 734-936-5634.

- 29 Community Forum on Asthma
Domino Farms, Ann Arbor, 7:30 a.m.-11:30 a.m., for more info: kstoerme@umich.edu

June

- 16 AIR Course
Location TBA, Flint, 8 a.m.-5 p.m., \$80 for health professionals, \$45 for students, must pre-register, for more info: <http://www.michiganrc.org/>