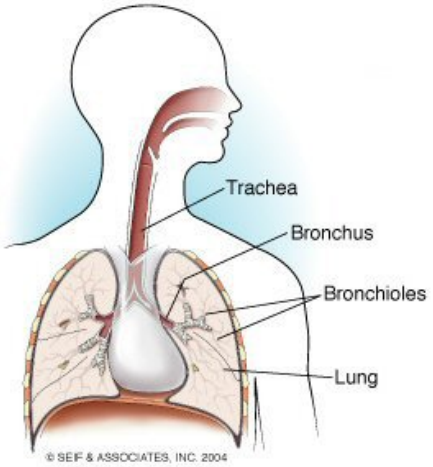
Bronchospasm, Adult

Bronchospasm means that there is a spasm or tightening of the airways going into the lungs. Because the airways go into a spasm and get smaller it makes breathing more difficult.

For reasons not completely known, workings (*functions*) of the airways designed to protect the lungs become over active. This causes the airways to become more sensitive to:

- Infection.
- Weather.
- Exercise.
- Irritants.
- Things that cause allergic reactions or allergies (*allergens*).

Frequent coughing or respiratory episodes should be checked for the cause. This condition may be made worse by exercise.



CAUSES

Inflammation is often the cause of this condition. Allergy, viral respiratory infections, or irritants in the air often cause this problem. Allergic reactions produce immediate and delayed responses. Late reactions may produce more serious inflammation. This may lead to increased reactivity of the airways. Sometimes this is inherited.

Some common triggers are:

- Allergies.
- Infection commonly triggers attacks. Antibiotics are not helpful for viral infections and usually do not help with attacks of bronchospasm.
- Exercise (running, etc.) can trigger an attack. Proper pre-exercise medications help most individuals participate in sports. Swimming is the least likely sport to cause problems.
- Irritants (for example, pollution, cigarette smoke, strong odors, aerosol sprays, paint fumes, etc.) may trigger attacks. **You cannot smoke and do not allow smoking in your home. This is absolutely necessary. Show this instruction to mates, relatives and significant others that may not agree with you.**
- Weather changes may cause lung problems but moving around trying to find an ideal climate does not seem to be overly helpful. Winds increase molds and pollens in the air. Rain refreshes the air by washing irritants out. Cold air may cause irritation.
- Emotional problems do not cause lung problems but can trigger attacks.

SYMPTOMS

Wheezing is the most common symptom. Frequent coughing (with or without exercise and or crying) and repeated respiratory infections are all early warning signs of bronchospasm. Chest tightness and shortness of breath are other symptoms.

DIAGNOSIS

Early hidden bronchospasm may go for long periods of time without being detected. This is especially true if wheezing cannot be detected by your caregiver. Lung (*pulmonary*) function studies may help with diagnosis in these cases.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- It is necessary to remain calm during an attack. Try to relax and breathe more slowly. During this time medications may be given. **If any breathing problems seem to be getting worse and are unresponsive to treatment seek immediate medical care.**
- If you have severe breathing difficulty or have had a life threatening attack it is probably a good idea for you to learn how to give adrenaline (epi-pen) or use an anaphylaxis kit. Your caregiver can help you with this. These are the same kits carried by people who have severe allergic reactions. This is especially important if you do not have readily accessible medical care.

- **With any severe breathing problems where epinephrine (adrenaline) has been given at home call 911 immediately as the delayed reaction may be even more severe.**

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- There is wheezing and shortness of breath, even if medications are given to prevent attacks.
- An oral temperature above 102º F (38.9º C) develops.
- There are muscle aches, chest pain, or thickening of sputum.
- The sputum changes from clear or white to yellow, green, gray, or bloody.
- There are problems that may be related to the medicine you are given, such as a rash, itching, swelling, or trouble breathing.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- The usual medicines do not stop your wheezing, or there is increased coughing.
- You have increased difficulty breathing.

MAKE SURE YOU:

- Understand these instructions.
- Will watch your condition.
- Will get help right away if you are not doing well or get worse.

Document Released: 02/01/2005 Document Re-Released: 03/16/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.