

WHAT IS SILENT ASTHMA?



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Asthma is a condition in which airways in the lungs narrow due to inflammation. It makes breathing difficult and typically causes symptoms that include coughing and wheezing.

Silent asthma is similar. However, the audible sounds are absent.

Be aware that “silent asthma” (also referred to as “silent chest”) is a general term to describe the lack of coughing and wheezing. It’s not a precise definition, and the condition has not been as thoroughly researched as typical asthma.

What is known is silent asthma’s adverse effects on breathing and quality of life are just as significant. In fact, the condition can be associated with severe forms of asthma, like status asthmaticus and fatal asthma.

SILENT ASTHMA SYMPTOMS AND TRIGGERS

People with silent asthma don't cough or wheeze like those with typical asthma, but otherwise, the symptoms of an attack are similar:

- Trouble breathing or feeling short of breath
- Chest tightness
- Distress or anxiety
- Fatigue
- Chest tightness
- Trouble speaking
- Restlessness

Severe symptoms that require emergency medical attention include:

- Observable "sucking in" of skin at the base of the neck and between the ribs (due to extreme effort of the breathing muscles)
- Rapid breathing
- Dizziness or loss of consciousness
- Inability to speak due to breathing difficulties
- Cyanosis (bluish or whitish/grayish color of the lips, tongue, or nail beds from insufficient oxygen)

Silent asthma also has the same potential triggers as typical asthma, including:

- Allergens like pet dander, mold, and pollen
- Tobacco smoke
- Airborne chemicals and toxins, including those from cleaning products, paint, etc.
- Exercise (especially workouts beyond the person's normal limits or without proper warm-up and cool-down periods)

SILENT ASTHMA RISK FACTORS

It's not typically clear why a person develops asthma or silent asthma. However, several risk factors increase the likelihood of being affected, including:

- Family history of allergies and asthma

- Existing allergies
- Respiratory infections
- Exposure to smoke, allergens, and other airborne irritants
- Obesity

Some of these, like genetics, are unavoidable. Others, such as your home environment and general health, are things you can control. Consequently, you should take action to lower your risk of developing asthma or having asthma attacks by not smoking, limiting the airborne irritants in your home, and achieving and maintaining a healthy weight.

HOW DO DOCTORS DIAGNOSE SILENT ASTHMA?

Doctors diagnose silent asthma in the same ways as typical asthma. They order tests like:

- Spirometry (assessment of how much air you move into and out of your lungs)
- Peak expiratory flow (how much air you can expel with maximum effort)
- Bronchoprovocation (changes in spirometry results when exposed to specific allergens)

They may also order a fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO) test. It checks lung inflammation as determined by increased nitric oxide (a byproduct of inflammation) in your breath.

SILENT ASTHMA TREATMENTS

Healthcare providers help patients manage silent asthma in multiple ways. They may prescribe medication to reduce the risk of an asthma attack and likely a fast-acting inhaler for use if you experience an attack.

They can also help you identify your asthma triggers and provide insights on how to avoid them. This and other information (like guidance on when you should seek emergency assistance) is typically provided in an “asthma action plan.”