

This Could Cause Your Pet to Suffocate – Without Advance Notice

Some pets can have very serious asthma without any or with just very subtle signs. Bottom line, your pet isn't getting enough air to breathe, causing irreversible damage until they suddenly are unable to breathe.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Asthma is a condition in which a dog or cat (more often a cat) has repeated episodes of coughing, wheezing, and difficulty breathing. The condition is more prevalent in pets with flat faces (brachycephalic breeds)
- Common triggers for pet asthma are inhaled substances such as grasses, pollens, aerosol sprays, and smoke
- Symptoms of asthma in pets include wheezing, labored breathing, and a dry hacking cough. Cats can have very serious asthma with no or very subtle symptoms that are difficult to detect
- Treatment of asthma in a cat or dog is focused on resolving the immediate breathing crisis, if necessary, and working longer term to eliminate all potential asthma triggers in the animal's environment. It's also advisable to work with a holistic veterinarian who can offer effective holistic protocols in conjunction with, or in lieu of, asthma medications
- There are many steps you can take as the guardian of an asthmatic pet to reduce the frequency and severity of episodes, including cleaning the air in your cat's or dog's environment, and transitioning to an anti-inflammatory, species-appropriate diet

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Asthma, which is also referred to as allergic bronchitis, bronchial asthma, or **chronic bronchitis**, is a condition in which a pet has recurrent attacks of wheezing, shortness of breath, and difficulty breathing.

Asthma is seen much more often in cats than dogs. It's also more prevalent in brachycephalic breeds, which are pets with flat or "pushed in" faces such as the Pug or the Persian cat.

During an asthma attack, there is constriction of the airways leading to the lungs. A buildup of mucus collects in the airways, causing them to become inflamed and sometimes even ulcerated. In response, the muscles of the airways spasm causing constriction that makes it very difficult for your pet to breathe.

Causes and Triggers

Airway constriction in pets can occur for no obvious reason, or it can be triggered by something in the environment the animal has inhaled, or even something your pet has eaten. There are many common triggers for pet asthma, including:

- Grasses, pollen, ragweed
- Mold and mildew
- Air pollution, including smog and smoke from wildfires or crop burning
- Household chemicals and cleaning products, including carpet cleaners
- Fertilizers and pesticides
- Dust mites
- Home remodeling products, including paint
- Cat litter dust
- Aerosol sprays, including room air fresheners
- Animal dander from a new or visiting pet
- Cigarette or fireplace smoke
- Animal dander exposure at a veterinary clinic or boarding facility

Asthma Symptoms

Pets with asthma can't draw a deep breath. Symptoms include a dry hack that often sounds like gagging or retching, as well as:

- Wheezing, which can sound like a high-pitched sigh or whistle
- Pale mucous membranes, especially bluish gums
- Labored breathing
- Lethargy
- Open-mouth breathing
- Lack of appetite
- Exercise intolerance
- Weight loss

If the condition becomes chronic, it can cause irreversible damage to the sensitive tissue lining of the respiratory passageways.

In cats, noticeable asthma symptoms aren't necessarily a measure of the severity of the condition, as kitties can have very serious asthmatic disease with very few observable symptoms.

Some cats show no symptoms at all, and then are suddenly unable to breathe, which can be a very scary situation for their humans. An acute asthma attack can cause suffocation in your pet. Obviously, this is a medical emergency that requires immediate veterinary attention.

Diagnosing Asthma

Symptoms of canine or feline asthma are seen in other diseases as well, so it's extremely important to get an accurate diagnosis. For example, cats with heart conditions are often misdiagnosed with asthma. Obviously, these two diseases are treated entirely differently, so a correct diagnosis is critical.

Other conditions that can mimic asthma symptoms are systemic allergies, including food allergies, and also heartworm infection. Lungworm infection is another common reason for asthma-like symptoms in both dogs and cats.

Sometimes, it's quite obvious by simply looking at the animal that he's having trouble breathing. The breaths are rapid and shallow, and the abdomen is working very hard to push air back out. There can also be open-mouth breathing, which in kitties is definitely not normal.

Typically, chest x-rays are taken but they don't always show changes to the lungs. A transtracheal wash is a procedure that retrieves cells from the lower airways, and it can be helpful in diagnosing asthma in pets with symptoms, but normal x-rays.

Another test that can help eliminate or confirm potential causes of acute or chronic coughing include a bronchoscopy, which is a procedure that involves passing a tiny camera down the bronchi to visualize the inside of the lungs and collect a tissue sample.

Other tests may include heartworm and fecal testing to check for internal parasites, echocardiography to assess heart function, and comprehensive blood and urine panels to assess your pet's systemic health and organ function.

Since diagnosing asthma in a pet isn't always straightforward, any information you can provide to the veterinarian will be helpful. For example, how long has your pet been coughing? Is it more of a cough or is it a gasp? Is it a dry or wet cough? Is he or she coughing up mucous, and if so, is it green or blood-tinged?

Are you noticing wheezing, choking, or other respiratory signs that aren't normal? How often are you seeing symptoms in your pet? Daily? Weekly? Only at night? How long do they last? Having answers to these questions will definitely help your veterinarian accurately diagnose your dog or cat.

Treatment Options

If your pet is having an asthma-related crisis, your vet or emergency animal clinic will administer a small dose of epinephrine to very quickly resolve the asthma attack and save your pet's life. Pure (100%) oxygen will also be given at the same time. In some acute situations, inhalant treatments with a nebulizer with or without additional medications are also required.

The goal of long-term treatment for asthma is to identify and eliminate all triggers in your pet's environment if possible. In cases of chronic asthma, complete resolution of the cough is almost never possible. In those cases, the goal is to reduce the frequency and severity of the cough, so that your pet is more comfortable.

I recommend you talk to a holistic veterinarian about natural remedies to control lung inflammation and promote respiratory health in your cat or dog. These can include anti-inflammatory plant sterols and sterolins, homeopathics to address your pet's specific symptoms, anti-inflammatory Chinese herbs, and acupuncture.

There are a wide variety of drugs that conventional veterinarians use to treat asthma, including bronchodilators and specially designed steroid inhalers. Vets often start with one or several of these drugs to manage severe asthma cases.

If your pet is taking drugs to control asthma, my advice is to work with a holistic veterinarian to wean your dog or cat down or off of some of the medications. It's possible to manage pets with respiratory disease using few or no drugs, but the weaning must be done gradually and there should be an effective replacement protocol in place first.

Pets with life-threatening asthma symptoms typically require at least some drugs to save their lives and reduce the intensity of attacks.

If you're vigilant about eliminating potential asthma triggers for your pet and you're working with a holistic veterinarian who can offer effective holistic protocols, you can often reduce both the frequency and severity of your pet's asthma symptoms, and also the amount of drugs needed.

Pet Asthma Prevention Tips

- Don't smoke. Give up smoking entirely, or at a minimum give it up around your pet and don't let others smoke around him. Second-hand smoke is a major trigger for asthma in sensitive pets.
- Give up using your fireplace. I know this can be tough to do, but the fact is, smoke of any kind is a trigger for dog and cat asthmatics. Fireplace smoke will settle in the low areas of your home, which is where your pet spends most of her time.
- Reduce or eliminate all household sprays, including anything aerosolized. Make sure your pet isn't in the same room with anyone spraying anything from a bottle or can.
- Get rid of scented plug-ins, candles, incense, heated potpourri — all products that give off an aroma, even if they're natural. Anything that emits a strong scent or releases particles into the air can be a trigger for sensitive pets (and people as well).
- Switch from chemical household cleaners to green cleaners. Keep in mind that even natural cleaners like vinegar give off an odor, so make sure your home is well-ventilated. It's also a good idea to remove your pet from the environment until all odors have dissipated.
- If your asthmatic pet is a cat, gradually switch to an unscented, low-dust litter. Mix the new litter with the litter your cat is used to, and gradually phase out the old stuff. Also, don't use bleach to disinfect the box. Use dish soap or vinegar and rinse thoroughly with warm water to remove any residual scent.
- If you have pet pest problems, use an all-natural, safe pest repellent for flea and tick control.
- Consider investing in an air purifier for your home and place it where your pet spends most of his time. Replace your HVAC air filters regularly.
- If your animal companion is overweight, get her down to a healthy size. Obesity makes lungs work a lot harder.
- Make sure your pet's daily routine stays very consistent, especially if you have a cat. Kitties don't do well with changes in their environment, and any type of stress can be a potential trigger for asthma.

- Feed a balanced, species-appropriate diet. A species-appropriate diet for dogs and cats also means an anti-inflammatory diet. Asthma is caused by inflammation of the airways in the lungs, so reducing inflammation across the board, including from dietary sources, is important. Eliminate pro-inflammatory foods like carbohydrates, corn, wheat, and rice. Avoid grains and any food or ingredient that is genetically modified.
 - Consider switching your pet to a raw or fresh food diet and a novel protein source. If your pet's asthma is a respiratory manifestation of a systemic allergic response, just switching away from the poultry or seafood, for example, can make a big difference.
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