



Take My Breath Away

Breathing is not something we often think about. It happens even if we aren't aware of it. But breathing doesn't come easily to everyone. The air isn't always as pure or clean as it seems. It's filled with invisible particles that can affect our breathing.

These particles — that range from air pollutants to pet dander to artificial fragrances — can compromise the lungs' natural defense system. For people who have breathing issues like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), unclean air can take their breath away.

COPD causes obstructed airflow because the lungs become chronically inflamed. People who have COPD often experience difficulty breathing, coughing fits, mucus and wheezing. The condition is caused by repeated exposure to irritating particulate matter like cigarette smoke or air pollution. COPD increases the risk of heart disease and lung cancer.

Asthma causes the airways to the lungs to narrow and produce extra mucus, which makes breathing difficult. Coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath usually accompany asthma attacks. The severity of asthma varies from person to person and can change as someone ages.

People with breathing issues need to reduce their exposure to lung irritants. But it's also helpful for people who don't have breathing issues to do what they can to lower the amount of irritants in the air. Some of these changes are simple, such as not wearing perfume in public places. Others — like reducing air pollution by driving less or not burning yard waste — can take more time to implement.

Exposure can happen indoors and outdoors. When using irritating chemicals during activities like painting, cleaning or other home improvements, use a mask. This will lower exposure to harmful volatile organic compounds that come from cleaning chemicals or oil-based paints. Radon is another indoor pollutant that can cause breathing difficulties. Radon is a radioactive gas that occurs naturally when uranium breaks down in the ground. It can leak into a house through cracks in the foundation and walls. It is the main cause of lung cancer among nonsmokers.

There are a lot of irritants outdoors, too, especially in the summer months. Sometimes limiting outdoor activities is critical, especially exercise. Pay attention to the air quality index. Summer months are known for having the worst air quality.

Besides reducing exposure to harmful chemicals, it is also possible to strengthen your body's natural defenses against weakened lungs. Aerobic exercise and specific breathing exercises can improve lung function in some cases. A 2010 study found that the risk of lung cancer was cut in half for people who consumed the most cruciferous vegetables, such as broccoli, cauliflower, cabbage, and kale.

Keeping the air quality healthy is a job for everyone, even those who don't have breathing issues. Think about ways to reduce air pollutants not only for your own health and that of your family, but for the health of the world — because we all breathe the same air.

