



Spirometry first step to breathing freedom

By Fred Reed, MD, North Basin Medical Clinics



Managing asthma is a very serious thing. Those who aggressively work with their doctor to diagnose and properly treat their asthma can, in the vast majority of cases, live a symptom-free life. That should be the goal of all asthma patients – no symptoms, *ever*.

However, one of the best tools to diagnose and keep track of your lung health is one all too often overlooked. This tool is called Spirometry.

Spirometry is a simple breathing test that takes only a few minutes at your doctor's office. The data it gathers is crucial to diagnosis and follow-up treatment of asthma. I especially ask my patients to come in on a good day – a normal day – to have this test taken. Many patients who tell me it's a good breathing day for them, find they're only breathing at 50 to 70 percent of where they should be.

There is no reason to be satisfied with 50 to 70 percent of lung function. I've seen too many asthma sufferers modify their lifestyle to fit their asthma by lowering their activity level or cutting out things they would like to do that might cause an asthma attack. This is nuts when you consider it's fairly simple to control your asthma to fit your lifestyle. The starting point is Spirometry.

The goal of Spirometry is simple – it measures how much air you can blow out of your lungs and the amount you can suck back in when you're done. To do the test, you're given a plastic mouthpiece which is hooked to a computer. You'll plug your nose, fill your lungs and with your doctor or a medical assistant coaching you, you'll blow as hard as you can for as long as you can. Then, without taking the mouthpiece out, you'll simply fill your lungs again. You'll do this three times so the computer can get a bigger picture of your lung activity.

If the data shows lower than normal lung function for your age, gender and height, your doctor will have you take a puff of Albuterol, wait 15 minutes, then take the test again. This will show whether, and how much, medication helps.

This simple test should be done annually so you and your doctor can see if you're making progress with asthma treatment, or if your lung health is slowly deteriorating. I especially urge smokers to get this test done if they're having symptoms such as cough or wheezing. It is a good baseline to see if you are losing lung function and may help you avoid emphysema through early detection.

I work with a local woman who spent 30 years living in fear of an asthma attack. She used her inhaler up to five times a week and avoided many activities. Recently, she had a Spirometry test done at the Davenport Clinic and the results showed her traditional treatment wasn't working. She was breathing at 60 percent of normal. Through a simple medication change, she's now breathing at over 90 percent of normal lung function and has not used her rescue inhaler since. Her comment was, "I never knew it could be this good -- that I could breathe like this. Have this test done because it's *so* worth it."

She's symptom-free. You can be too.

The bottom line is this. Annual Spirometry testing can give you and your doctor a clearer picture of your lung function. You may find you don't have asthma at all. You may find you need a different treatment. But without this test, you really have no starting point – and without a starting point, how can you reach your goal of no symptoms, *ever*? It is attainable. Don't be satisfied with living your life to fit your asthma. Make your asthma fit your life.

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