



HEALTH

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IN THIS EDITION

Breathe Easy This Winter:
Managing Chronic Respiratory
Conditions



Breathe Easy This Winter: Managing Chronic Respiratory Conditions

The cold, dry winter air is often associated with common issues such as viral infections (colds, flu, COVID-19, RSV), bacterial infections (pneumonia, strep throat), and severe flare-ups in chronic conditions like Asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). For individuals living with chronic respiratory conditions, the colder months present unique challenges that require extra vigilance and proactive care. Taking care of our respiratory health becomes a top priority.

Understanding Chronic Respiratory Conditions

Chronic respiratory diseases are of significant public health concern in Zimbabwe. These include Asthma, COPD, and Pneumoconiosis. In addition, HIV-related lung diseases are also among the most common conditions affecting respiratory health. The drop in temperature and

How Winter Weather Affects Your Lungs

Cold weather impacts the respiratory system in several ways:

- Cold, Dry Air:** Cold air constricts the airways and reduces the amount of warm, humid air entering the lungs. This causes irritation, inflammation, and shortness of breath, especially for those with asthma, COPD, allergies, or sinus issues.

- Air Pollution:** Stagnant winter air can trap pollutants closer to the ground, making breathing more difficult for sensitive individuals.

- A Spike in Respiratory Infections:** Viruses thrive in cold weather. Flu, bronchitis, and pneumonia cases spike during winter, placing vulnerable individuals at a higher risk.

- A Weakened Immune System:** Winter weather dries out mucus membranes and allows certain resilient viruses to spread more easily, leading to lower nasal immunity. Furthermore, your body is diverting

extra energy just to stay warm, leaving fewer resources to fight off infections.

The Hidden Risk: Winter Dehydration

Generally, people face a higher risk of dehydration during winter. Airways need moisture to humidify the air entering the body. Dehydration worsens respiratory issues due to the following:

- 1. Hidden Sweating:** Heavy winter coats and thick layers trap heat, causing individuals to sweat without feeling hot.

- 2. Dry Air:** Cold air holds less moisture; therefore, lungs have to work much harder to humidify every single breath.

- 3. Indoor Heating:** Artificial heating systems strip moisture from indoor spaces, accelerating evaporation directly from the skin.

- 4. Thirst Suppression:** Cold weather constricts blood vessels to conserve core heat, which tricks the brain into thinking you are perfectly hydrated.

Red Flags: Symptoms to Watch For

Keep a close eye on your health and watch out for these warning signs:

- Tightness or heaviness in the chest
- A wheezing or whistling sound when breathing.
- Shortness of breath during basic, everyday activities.
- A persistent, stubborn cough.
- A burning sensation or severe dryness in the throat.
- Excessive mucus production or severe congestion.
- Fatigue caused by reduced oxygen intake.

Action Plan: Managing Your Condition & Medication

Managing chronic conditions requires a dual approach combining smart lifestyle habits with a strict medical routine. Always consult your doctor for prescription management and

your pharmacist for over-the-counter guidance.

1. Essential Lifestyle Habits

- **Stay Hydrated:** Drink water regularly throughout the day, even if you don't feel thirsty.
- **Practice Good Hygiene:** Wash your hands regularly to eliminate winter germs and avoid crowded gatherings or direct contact with individuals suffering from airborne infections.
- **Protect Your Environment:** Consider using a humidifier to add essential moisture to indoor air and prevent your nasal passages from drying out.
- **Protect Your Lungs:** Avoid both active and passive smoking or vaping, as tobacco and chemical vapours are highly hazardous to vulnerable lungs.
- **Stay Active & Eat Well:** Maintain balanced nutrition and engage in

safe, moderate physical activity to support overall lung health.

- **Get Vaccinated:** Ensure you receive your annual flu vaccine as the cold season begins.

2. Medication Routine & Tracking

- **Follow Your Management Plan:** Strictly adhere to your doctor's prescribed treatment plan for asthma or COPD.
- **Be Prepared:** Always keep your rescue inhaler with you wherever you go.
- **Set Reminders:** Use alarms or smartphone apps to remind you when it is time to take your pills or daily controller medication.
- **Inventory Check:** Regularly check the expiration dates on your medication, set reminders for refills before you run out, and ensure you maintain an adequate supply throughout the season.

When to seek help

If your symptoms persist or worsen after applying standard over-the-counter remedies, do not delay; schedule an appointment to see a doctor immediately.