

# New study explores how anxiety can aggravate asthma

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Alison McLeish. Credit: Ashley Kempfer

Anxiety sensitivity, in simple terms, is a fear of fear. But when people with anxiety sensitivity also have asthma, their suffering can be far more debilitating and dangerous, because they have difficulty managing their

asthma. A new study explores this issue and recommends treatment to help decrease asthma symptoms. The study by Alison McLeish, a University of Cincinnati associate professor of psychology, Christina Luberto, a recent doctoral graduate from UC and clinical fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital, and Emily O'Bryan, a graduate student in the UC Department of Psychology, will be presented at the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT) 49th Annual Convention. The convention takes place Nov. 12-15 in Chicago.

The researchers recruited 101 college undergraduates who reported having [asthma](#). The experiment aimed to mimic asthma symptoms by having study participants breathe in-and-out through a narrow straw, about the width of a coffee-stirrer straw.

As expected, people who reported higher anxiety sensitivity not only reported greater anxiety during the straw-breathing task, but also experienced greater [asthma symptoms](#) and decreased lung function. "Anxiety sensitivity not only helps explain why we see higher rates of [anxiety disorders](#), but also why anxiety is associated with poorer asthma outcomes," says McLeish.

As a result, the study recommended interventions for [anxiety sensitivity](#) - such as exposure therapy - aimed at reducing the anxiety.

Safety controls were in place during the straw-breathing exercise and all participants were required to have their inhalers with them in case they experienced an [asthma attack](#). Students were told they could stop at any time during the straw-breathing exercise.

The UC presentation at the ABCT Convention is part of a Nov. 14 symposium titled, "Motivation Escape and Avoidant Coping: The Impact of Distress Intolerance on Health Behaviors." The research will be published in an upcoming special issue of the journal Behavior

Modification and is currently featured ahead of the print issue in the journal's online first section.

Funding for the research was supported by the University Research Council at UC.

**More information:** A. C. McLeish et al. Anxiety Sensitivity and Reactivity to Asthma-Like Sensations Among Young Adults With Asthma, *Behavior Modification* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0145445515607047](https://doi.org/10.1177/0145445515607047)

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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