

Sports and Asthma

People with asthma should be encouraged to take part in any sport they choose. If someone with asthma is having difficulty with sport, it means their asthma may not be under control. You will need to see your doctor to review your controller treatment - and the way you use your medication - in order to allow you to live your life to the full with no limitations on activities or sport.

HOW DOES EXERCISE CAUSE ASTHMA?

- Most people with asthma cough or develop a tight chest after certain kinds of exercise. Cold or dry air may act as triggers, causing the airways in the lungs to narrow;
- If they narrow slightly, the person simply coughs after the exercise. If they narrow even more, the chest becomes tight;
- This occurs after about 6 to 10 minutes of exercise and may interfere with the continuation of sport. If not recognised, the person will perform the exercise with a partially tight chest. The tight chest may open on its own after an hour or two, or it may become necessary to use a reliever asthma pump;
- This coughing or tightness of the chest after exercise is usually a clue that your asthma is not well controlled. If you get tight chests or coughing with exercise, you need to see your doctor to review your asthma treatment;
- Problems during exercise are easily prevented with safe medications; and
- Some people's symptoms after exercise are the only sign of asthma, as they do not cough or wheeze at other times.



SOME COMMON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT ASTHMA, SPORT AND EXERCISE

If I or my child has asthma, should we be allowed to play sport?

Definitely, yes. This is one of the goals of successful asthma management. Correct use of controller medication should prevent symptoms that occur with exercise in asthmatic people (cough and chest tightness). Asthma cannot be cured but can be kept under control so that those affected are able to live normal lives, enjoying full involvement in sport and all other activities.

What kinds of exercise are better?

- The most important message is that anybody with asthma must be able to exercise freely and must be able to participate in any sport they choose or are good at;
- Swimming is a good sport for asthmatics;
- Short burst types of exercise are better e.g. sprinting; and
- Longer distance running, where an asthmatic runs at about three-quarters pace for 6 to 10 minutes, is more likely to cause coughing and tightness of the chest e.g. cross country or marathon running.

Sports and Asthma

What if we like running long distances but cannot swim well?

Continue running and use the simple methods outlined below to make sure your asthma is under control and to prevent symptoms during exercise.

What can I do to improve my own or my child's exercise tolerance?

Use the asthma pumps to prevent exercise-related chest tightness. Become fit and do normal activities, as exercise is good for everyone. This usually allows people to cope better with asthma.

How do I prevent my child from developing exercise-induced wheezing or coughing?

- Use a regular controller asthma pump to keep asthma under control; and
- If there is coughing or wheezing with exercise but not at other times, and your doctor agrees that your asthma is otherwise under control, these can be prevented by using simple and safe reliever medications (asthma pumps) before exercise.

Make sure you know which pump is your reliever and which is your controller (see *Asthma Medicines and How They Work*).

How do I treat my asthma once the exercise-related coughing or wheezing has already happened?

Use a reliever bronchodilator.



If we get an asthma attack during a sporting event, when should the exercise be stopped?

Prevention is always better than cure. If the attack occurs despite the use of a reliever medication before exercise, repeat this medication during the exercise when the chest gets tight. If the symptoms continue, the exercise should be stopped.

Is it important to recognise 'exercise-induced' asthma?

Yes. This is an important clue for diagnosing asthma. It can be treated easily and effectively. If an asthmatic person has difficulty with exercise, your asthma may not be properly controlled. You may need more medication, or a change in medication, and you will need to see your doctor. He or she will check if you have symptoms at other times, how frequently you are taking your controller medication, and may assess your technique of using your pumps. For tips on better control, see *Keeping Asthma Under Control*.

Are any asthmatics famous for sporting achievements?

Many Olympic medals have been won by people with asthma. Also, many people with asthma achieve provincial and national colours for their sport. Schalk Burger has achieved sporting excellence despite having asthma and has been a NAEP Asthma Ambassador, spreading the message

Sports and Asthma

that people with asthma should have no limitation on their activities at all. By regular use of controller medication every day, asthmatics can take part - and even excel - in any sport they wish.

What about Sporting Drug Control Units and the legality of inhaled corticosteroids used for asthma?

Inhaled corticosteroids are not the same as anabolic steroids, used by some athletes to improve their performance. Inhaled corticosteroids and reliever medications are allowed by sporting regulating agencies if the sportsman or woman has asthma. The rules for reporting asthma medication change periodically and if you are an elite athlete you should always check yourself and not rely purely on your doctor knowing all the facts. Certain of the once-daily medications are not yet approved and need a motivation letter (Therapeutic Use Exemption).

How do I decide if I or my child has exercise-related asthma or not?

All people get breathless after exercise. If exercise is followed by coughing, wheezing or chest tightness, exercise-induced asthma is very likely. You can blow into a peak flow meter for measuring breathing before and after exercise. If the reading (peak flow) on the meter drops by 15% or more, it confirms that you are getting exercise-induced asthma (see *Lung Functions in Asthma*).

How soon can we resume exercise after an attack?

If your peak flow reading has returned to within 80% of your personal normal value, you are able to exercise normally and safely. Your doctor can assist you in making this decision.



Should we be encouraged to lead a completely normal life with regular competitive exercise?

YES.

Are there any ways of preventing 'exercise-induced asthma' without using medications?

As the medications are safe, using them is the best way to control exercise-induced asthma. However, if you warm up first with some stretching and slow running, the exercise that follows will be managed better. Avoid exercising at very cold or hot parts of the day and be careful when the air is dusty or very dry, as this might make your asthma worse.

What if we get asthma all the time and cannot do strenuous exercise?

This probably means that asthma is poorly controlled. Consult your doctor to choose the controller treatment best suited to your needs or to review the medication you are on.

Are there any sports that asthmatics should avoid?

If your asthma is correctly managed and well controlled, you can usually play any sport. The only sport that asthmatics should participate in with caution is scuba diving.

Written by Prof Robin Green (2008) Revised 2012. Based on an original by Dr Fred Nagel.

Revised 2020 by Prof Richard van Zyl-Smit.