

Asthma and exercise

Being active is great for your health and wellbeing. Sometimes, however, the physical exertion of exercising or playing sport can trigger an episode of asthma. This is called 'exercise-induced asthma' (EIA). Exercise-induced asthma is usually easily managed and should be part of any asthma management plan.

As well as being good for you, regular physical activity can help you manage your asthma. Take time to learn how to manage your asthma so you can have a healthy and active lifestyle.

People with asthma should be able to participate in almost any sport or exercise. Scuba diving is the only sport not recommended. Most individuals with EIA can exercise to their full potential if their symptoms are managed properly. Many top athletes competing at national and international level have asthma.

Exercise-induced asthma

Most people with asthma have asthma symptoms if they exercise in dry or cold air. When at rest, you breathe through your nose and the air is warmed, moistened and filtered as it enters your body. When you exercise, you need more oxygen and so you breathe faster through your mouth. Your airways react to this cold, dry air and the muscles around them tighten.

Asthma symptoms can occur during or, more commonly, after exercise. Some of the symptoms of EIA include:

- Wheezing
- Coughing
- A feeling of tightness in the chest
- Breathlessness.

It is the type of exercise, the amount of time spent exercising and the intensity of exercise that is important. Typically, vigorous activity for six minutes or more in cold, dry air is more likely to trigger asthma.

Preparing for exercise

You can reduce the risk or prevent exercise-induced asthma by preparing for physical activity in a few simple ways:

- Make sure your day-to-day asthma is well managed.
- Use your asthma reliever medication around five to ten minutes before you warm up. Speak to your doctor for advice.
- Always warm up with light exercise and stretching for 10 to 15 minutes before you play sport or exercise.
- Always cool down.

If you get exercise-induced asthma during activity

If you feel the symptoms of asthma while exercising:

- Stop what you're doing.

- Follow your asthma action plan. If you do not have a plan, take four separate puffs of your blue reliever medication (such as Airomir, Asmol, Bricanyl, or Ventolin). If appropriate, this medication is best taken one puff at a time via a spacer with four breaths taken from the spacer after each puff of medication.
- Wait four minutes.
- Only return to exercise or activity if you are free of symptoms.
- If the symptoms don't go away, or if they return while you're exercising, use your blue reliever as before. Do not return to any exercise or activity for the rest of the day and see your doctor.

A 'spacer' is a special device shaped like a clear plastic football or tube through which aerosol inhaler (not dry powder inhaler) medications are inhaled. Medication must come in a metered dose inhaler (puffer) to be used with a spacer.

When to avoid exercise

You should avoid exercise if:

- Your asthma is not under control
- You have a cold or the flu
- Your peak flow meter reading is less than 80 per cent of your usual best.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- The Asthma Foundation of Victoria Tel. 1800 645 130 or (03) 9326 7088
- Australian Sports Anti-Doping Authority – for guidelines for athletes on medication and sport Tel. 1800 020 506 or (02) 6206 0200

Things to remember

- Regular activity is an important part of life. Don't let asthma stop you from being active.
- Vigorous exercise can sometimes trigger exercise-induced asthma.
- Exercise-induced asthma can be prevented with medication and by preparing for exercise.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Asthma Foundation of Victoria

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