

ASTHMA

WHAT IS IT?

Asthma is a condition that affects the airways which carry air in and out of the lungs. If you have asthma your airways are particularly sensitive and may be inflamed. Your asthma is likely to be triggered by irritants like cold air, dust, pollen, smoke, exercise and dander (animal hair and dust).

The symptoms of asthma vary but the most common symptom is coughing. Contrary to popular belief wheezing is not always present. Other symptoms include a shortness of breath, or a tight feeling in your chest.

EXERCISE AND ASTHMA

Asthma is no obstacle to exercise and playing sport. Many Olympic competitors, footballers and elite sports people, have asthma. Research also suggests that around 80% of people with asthma have symptoms that are triggered by exercise. It is thought that the increased intake of air due to a faster breathing rate, makes it more difficult for the nose and airways to warm and moisten the air being breathed in. Therefore the air is colder and dryer than in normal breathing circumstances. It is thought that this may trigger asthma. However there are many ways that you can minimise the chances of this occurring (see Staying safe) and the health benefits of participating in regular physical activity far outweigh any drawbacks.



Staying safe continued

- Avoid activity if you have significant asthma symptoms before you start the exercise.
- Activities with intermittent periods of exertion such as golf and tennis or team sports such as football, netball and volleyball are less likely to cause asthma symptoms than long distance running as they involve bursts with short breaks in between.
- Activities like yoga can also be particularly beneficial as it teaches proper breathing techniques.
- Make sure you spend 10 minutes cooling down at the end of each exercise session. This will help reduce the risk of getting asthma symptoms afterwards.
- If you are playing sport at a competitive level, find out from the relevant sporting governing body which asthma medications are permitted. Some are classed as performance-enhancing drugs and competitors are not allowed to take them. Contact UK sport (see below).
- Physical activity – as well as viral infections, cold weather, pollens and animal dander, are common triggers of asthma, but symptoms can be prevented by appropriate management. If your asthma symptoms are not controlled, you should ask your doctor or nurse to review your treatment.

Remember: The more active you are, the more benefits you will get.

Be active - be safe - have fun!

For more information

- National Asthma Campaign 0845 701 0302 and www.asthma.org.uk
- BBC Online Health www.bbc.co.uk/health/asthma/
- NHS Direct 0845 4647 or www.nhsdirect.co.uk
- SportEX Health - information on physical activity www.sportex.net
- UK Sport 020 7841 9500 or www.ukssport.gov.uk

Local information

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND ASTHMA

How does physical activity help if you have asthma?

- Many people have misconceptions about the effect of physical activity on asthma. Research has shown that physical activity can help prevent the airways from tightening up when triggered, and lead to fewer asthma attacks.
- As you get fitter this can help reduce exercise induced asthma.
- Physical activity is particularly important for children with asthma, it boosts their self-esteem and confidence, and enables them to do more and cope better with their asthma. Also, being physically active while you are young helps you continue to be active in adulthood.
- Physical activity also helps reduce many other forms of ill health such as high blood pressure, high blood cholesterol and being overweight.
- In addition physical activity, along with a healthy diet, helps reduce stress, improves your overall feeling of well-being and quality of life and helps you to sleep well.
- It also reduces the risk of bowel cancer, osteoporosis and the risk of falling.

What type of activity is best?

While stamina-based activity is particularly important for health benefits, you also need to include some strength and flexibility-based activity to get the best health gains.

Stamina-type activities: Walking, swimming, cycling, dancing, tennis and housework (washing floors or windows)

Strength-type activities: Walking uphill, carrying shopping, climbing stairs, gardening (digging or mowing) and housework

Flexibility-type activities: Dancing, yoga, Pilates, T'ai Chi and gardening

Tips on increasing your activity level

- Walking is an ideal activity as it's free and easy to do anywhere. Perhaps take a dog for a walk to make it more interesting.
- Look for opportunities to be active during your whole day. For example park at the far end of the car park, or walk one stop further to catch the bus, and take 10 minutes out of your lunch break to go for a walk.
- Try using the stairs instead of the escalator. If you do use the escalator start by walking part of the way up and gradually progress to walking up the whole way.
- Choose activities that you enjoy doing. Involve your friends and family to make your activities fun, sociable and enjoyable.

How much and how often?

Frequency Your main aim is to build up to 30 minutes of moderate intensity activity on 5 or more days of the week. If this seems too much to start with, try starting with 3 x 10 minute walks spread throughout the day and work towards 2 x 15 minute walks and then 30 continuous minutes. One goal is to try and increase your activity by 2 minutes each day.

Intensity Moderate intensity means breathing harder and getting warmer than normal. It does not need to be hard. You should be able to talk and be active at the same time.

Advice Whatever your chosen activity, it should be performed at a gentle intensity which gradually increases until after about 10 minutes you have reached the level you can maintain for your chosen period of activity. This gets the blood flowing to your muscles and allows your heart rate to increase gradually. When you are nearing the end of your activity you should also slowly decrease the level of activity over 5-10 minutes to allow your heart rate to slow down gradually.

Remember Set yourself realistic goals and don't worry if you miss one day. Just make sure that the next day you pick up where you left off.

Staying safe

During physical activity, you breathe more rapidly and this cools and dries the lining of the airways. This can irritate them and bring on an asthma attack. The following can help prevent this from happening:

- Use a fast-acting blue inhaler 15-20 minutes before starting to exercise. This can significantly reduce and even eliminate exercise-induced asthma. The effects can last up to four hours.
- Before starting to exercise, do a gentle warm-up alternating between some stretches and a few 30 second sessions of jogging on the spot. This will help reduce the risk of getting asthma symptoms while you are doing the exercise.
- Try to minimise your exposure to asthma triggers such as pollen and cold weather while you are exercising. For example wearing a scarf or cycle mask over your mouth can help prevent your airways from drying and cooling. Alternatively exercise indoors instead of outdoors when it is cold, for example in a gym.
- If you have, or have recently had, a respiratory infection, cut down on the amount of physical activity you do until you are well.