

Exercise and Asthma: A Healthy Combination

What causes an asthma attack?

Asthma attacks can sometimes be caused by specific agents, such as pollens, dust mites, animal dander, drugs, food, wine, molds, fumes, smoke and chemicals. However, they may also be caused by emotional stress, exercise, and exposure to cold or a viral respiratory infection. Because of this risk, many people diagnosed with asthma don't feel like exercising, and many others are afraid to because they think exercise might trigger an attack. An exercise induced asthma attack is most likely to occur 5-20 minutes after the start of exercise or 5-10 minutes after the termination of exercise. Exercising regularly can build up tolerance and may decrease the likelihood of an asthma attack.

Do I have exercise-induced asthma?

For some, exercise may be the only cause of asthma symptoms. A history of cough, shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness, wheezing or endurance problems during exercise may suggest exercise-induced asthma. This often indicates the asthma is not properly controlled. Appropriate therapy can help eliminate these symptoms.

How do I manage my asthma?

The goal of asthma management is to allow you to participate in any activity you choose without experiencing symptoms. To help manage your asthma during activity, follow these strategies:

- Identify and eliminate asthma triggers.
- Prevent and minimize attacks by taking medications as recommended by your doctor.

What types of exercise are best?

If you have been diagnosed with asthma, moderate intensity activities such as swimming, walking, and biking or low impact aerobics may be a good place to start. If you wish to train in higher intensities you must slowly increase intensity over time. Select an environment that will help you avoid asthma triggers. For most, indoor activity works well while some may do well outdoors most of the time. Here are a few things to consider when choosing moderate intensity activities:

- Cardiovascular exercise should be performed for 30 minutes on most days of the week. Strengthening and stretching are also important in order to keep your body functioning well throughout daily living activities.
- A gradual aerobic warm-up of 5-10 minutes is essential. The warm-up helps the airways adjust to the increased demand, rather than having to instantly respond to a heightened need.
- Short bursts of activity, followed by short rest periods are sometimes better than a long period of heavy exertion. They may also temporarily induce a refractory period where asthma attacks are less likely to occur.
- Many people with asthma find that aquatic activities are enjoyable because of the moist environment; however, some may have adverse reactions to chlorine and molds.
- Avoid exercising in environments that will trigger an attack, such as cold dry air. If exercising outside be careful of outdoor allergens, as this may induce an asthma attack.
- Be flexible with your schedule and don't push yourself. If you are having a flare-up, take immediate care of your asthma symptoms.
- Judge the intensity of your exercise by using the "talk test" - if you can carry on a conversation while exercising, you are not exercising too hard. Slow down if you feel dizzy or faint. If you have to stop exercising suddenly, find a place to sit or recline in a comfortable position until your breathing has returned to normal.
- Be sure to include a proper cool down that takes 5-10 minutes, to help avoid asthma attacks that occur after exercise.

References

- American Council on Exercise Fit Facts. Exercise and Asthma, 2001
American College of Sports Medicine's Certified News. Asthma and Exercise, 2003 (13)1

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

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