Asthma, Breathing & Physical Activity
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Asthma, breathing and physical activity

We all know that physical activity is good for us.

Many people with asthma withdraw from physical activity because they become frightened or don’t understand what is happening to their bodies when they are active and experience asthma symptoms.

For people with asthma, physical activity is particularly important. It improves lung capacity, blood flow and has an overall calming effect. Active people usually have less symptoms and better control over their asthma.

It is easy to build physical activity into your life. Sport and Recreation NZ (SPARC) recommends just 30 minutes of brisk walking on most days of the week. This can be in ten minute bites if squeezing in thirty minutes a day is difficult.

Exercise induced asthma

People with asthma often have symptoms when they are physically active, especially if the air is cold and dry or they are unfit. For some people it is the only time they experience asthma symptoms.

There are many world-class athletes taking part in all sporting codes who do not let their asthma get in the way of achieving their goals. They control their asthma – their asthma does not control them.

Exercise induced asthma can be managed with the right information and help from your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or asthma educator.
Do you have exercise induced asthma?

Some signs of asthma are:

- a tight feeling in the chest
- wheezing (noisy breathing)
- breathlessness
- coughing

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms during physical activity or your peak flow\(^1\) drops 20% after exercise, your asthma may be exercise induced. Please see your doctor.

What causes exercise induced asthma?

*There are two theories about the cause of exercise induced asthma.*

Some researchers believe that the cool air you breathe when you exercise dries the lining of your airways. This triggers your airways to spasm and become tight. This is called the ‘water-loss theory’.

Another theory is that increased breathing during activity cools your airways. When activity stops, the blood vessels dilate to heat the lining of the airways. The airways narrow and cause shortness of breath and wheezing. This is called the ‘heat-exchange theory’.

Don’t let exercise induced asthma slow you down! It is really important that people with exercise induced asthma don’t avoid physical activity. Read on to find out how to take control of your exercise induced asthma.

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\(^{1}\) Ask your doctor for a peak flow meter to measure how fast you can blow air out of your lungs. When your airways are swollen, you get a lower peak flow reading.
Managing exercise induced asthma

1. Control your day-to-day asthma

i. Controlling your day-to-day asthma should improve your exercise induced asthma

If you have symptoms of asthma more than three times a week, your asthma is not well controlled. See your doctor to review your medicines and ask for an Asthma Self Management Plan.

ii. Try to avoid exercising on days when you are experiencing asthma symptoms e.g. when you are getting a cold

2. Prepare yourself for physical activity

i. Participate in asthma-friendly activities when you can

Activities involving stopping and starting or a warm moist environment are less likely to cause exercise induced asthma e.g. swimming, walking, tramping, tennis, yoga, martial arts, tai chi, aerobics and team sports.

ii. Always warm up

Stretching and a few minutes of brisk walking or skipping before exercise will:

• Help prevent exercise induced asthma
• Protect you from sprains and strains
• Get you in the mood to move!
iii. Check weather conditions

- If you have a choice, exercise inside on cooler dryer days.
- If you are outside and it is cold, wear a thin warm scarf loosely around your lower face. This will help warm the air you breathe.

iv. Use your reliever inhaler before activity

Take 1–2 puffs of your reliever medicine just before you start physical activity. If you need to take reliever medication more than once after your initial puff, then stop your activity session for that day. Using a spacer increases the effectiveness of Metered Dose Inhalers (MDIs).

If you exercise often and you require a dose of reliever before and during your session, ask your doctor to reassess your preventer medication dosage. You may also like to discuss with your doctor whether long acting inhaled relievers/symptom controllers may be an option for you, as they often help people with exercise induced asthma. You do need to be taking regular preventer medication to be prescribed these medicines.

Other useful medicines/medications to discuss with your doctor are Intal, Tilade or Vicrom – they are usually preventer medicines but can also be used before exercise.

v. Breathe – don’t heave!

Taking slow deep breaths through your nose with the right breathing pattern can help people with exercise induced asthma.
**LEARN TO BREATHE EASY**

Here are four tips to help correct your breathing pattern:

1. **Breathe through your nose**

   *It is important to breathe through your nose as this warms, filters and moistens the air that enters your lungs. It also helps to regulate your breathing.*

   Nose breathing may take practice, especially if you aren’t used to it.

   If your nose is often blocked by hay-fever or sinusitis, ask your doctor about nasal treatments. Controlling hay-fever and clearing your nose can make a big difference to your daily life and to your asthma.

2. **Use your diaphragm to breathe**

   *Your diaphragm is a large muscle separating your lungs from your abdomen. Your diaphragm can work hard and never get tired.*

   Some people breathe using their chest muscles instead of their diaphragm. This takes extra effort and can cause fatigue and tension.
Test yourself to see whether you breathe correctly through your diaphragm (diaphragmatic breathing):

1. Sit upright and relax your shoulders
2. Rest one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach
3. Breathe in deeply through your nose and pay attention to the movement of your hands.

If you use your diaphragm to breathe, the hand on your stomach will move.
If you use your chest muscles to breathe, the hand on your chest will move.

Try both ways of breathing and feel the difference. If you are a chest breather, practise diaphragmatic breathing for a few moments several times a day. Soon diaphragmatic breathing will become automatic.

3 Relax while breathing out

It is important to relax and let the air flow out of your lungs slowly and freely. Take a moment to remind yourself how good it feels:

1. Sit upright and relax your shoulders
2. Remember to breathe through your nose
3. Using your diaphragm breathe in gently and fully
4. Then just let go
5. Feel the air flow out fully and effortlessly
Doesn’t this feel natural and relaxing? Practise relaxing while you breathe out and it will become automatic.

4 | Breathe rhythmically

Most people breathe faster when they are tense or anxious. Their breathing becomes short and shallow. This type of breathing is inefficient, tiring and it can make you feel uptight or frightened.

Slow rhythmic breathing can help calm you. Practise this exercise several times a day:

1. Sit upright and relax your shoulders
2. Breathe in gently and fully using your diaphragm
3. Let your breath flow out freely
4. To slow down, pause a moment before your next inward breath
5. Aim for a rhythm of about 10 – 14 breaths per minute

We recommend a book on breathing called: *Breathing Works for Asthma*, by Dinah Bradley and Tania Clifton Smith, (Tandem Press, NZ.)
**Having fun and staying active**

*Being fit and healthy can make a positive difference to your life in many different ways. It is particularly beneficial for people with asthma.*

Take control of your asthma and enjoy an active and rewarding lifestyle.

For ideas on fun ways to get active, see www.sparc.org.nz, or phone 0800-ACTIVE (0800-228-483). For advice and support in getting active, ask your doctor or nurse for a Green Prescription.

If you have asthma, take regular medications, and partake in competitive sport, check that your medications won’t affect any drug-testing by calling 0800DRUGFREE (0800-3784-3733) or go to www.drugfreesport.org.nz
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All donations are appreciated

The Foundation is a non-government charitable organisation providing education, research and advocacy on all respiratory conditions.