

Patient Update

Recognizing signs of exercise-induced asthma

Do you ever cough, wheeze, or experience chest tightness when exercising? Do you feel extremely tired or short of breath when you exert yourself? If so, you may be one of many people with exercise-induced asthma (EIA).

Approximately 18 million Americans are reported to suffer from asthma, including one in every six Olympic athletes, and EIA affects 90% of all asthmatics.

For people suffering from asthma, strenuous physical exercise can bring about asthma symptoms. Many non-asthmatic patients, up to 40% of patients with allergic rhinitis, and often people who have a family history of allergies, can experience asthma associated with exercise.

People suffering from EIA, experience difficulty breathing within 5-20 minutes after exercise. Symptoms of EIA can include:

- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Coughing
- Chest pain
- Prolonged shortness of breath

These symptoms are caused by airways that are overly sensitive to sudden changes in temperature and humidity, especially when breathing colder, drier air. During strenuous activity, people tend to breathe through their mouths, allowing the cold, dry air to reach the lower airways without passing through the warming, humidifying effect of the nose.

Recommended activities

Certain activities are better for people with EIA, although the type and duration of these activities varies with each individual. Swimming has many positive factors for those with EIA. A warm, humid atmo-



sphere, year-round availability, toning of upper body muscles, and the horizontal position can help mobilize mucus from the bottom of the lungs. Walking, leisure biking, hiking, and free downhill skiing are also less likely to trigger EIA. Wearing a scarf or surgical mask in cold weather can also decrease symptoms by warming the inhaled air.

Sports that require short bursts of energy, such as baseball, football, wrestling, golfing, gymnastics, short-term track and field events or surfing are also less likely to trigger EIA.

People with EIA should not stop exercising. Exercise is good for all people, including those with asthma. If you have been diagnosed with EIA, talk with your doctor about a personalized management plan for your EIA and begin exercising again. Many asthmatics have found that with proper training and medical treatment, they are able to reduce the symptoms of EIA.

Treatment

EIA can be treated effectively by following this basic treatment checklist:

- Use a short-acting inhaler 15 minutes prior to exercise. This helps asthma exacerbations and lasts from 4-6 hours.
- Warm up for 6-10 minutes before beginning a full exercise program.
- Drink plenty of fluids.
- Stop exercising if symptoms arise.
- Cool down at the end of your exercise.

Athletes of all levels need to remember to take proper precautions if they have exercise-induced asthma. Exercise is beneficial to both physical health and emotional well-being.

All people with EIA should be able to exercise to their full ability with appropriate diagnosis and treatment. For more information, ask your allergist/immunologist.

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