



Exercise Induced Asthma

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Do you cough, have shortness of breath, chest tightness, or wheeze with exercise? Does exercising in cold air make your symptoms worse? If so, you could have exercise induced asthma. Asthma as a chronic condition is seen in about 7% of the population in the United States. Exercise induced asthma may even be a more common condition.

Estimates have been made that nearly 11% of the population may have this condition. In the 1996 Olympics nearly 17% of the athletes had some degree of asthma in the past and approximately 10% had active asthma. The presence of controlled asthma did not affect the probability of winning medals. 30% of the United States Olympians with asthma won medals in 1996. In the 1998 Winter Olympics, sensitive tests demonstrated that 23% of the athletes had some degree of exercise induced asthma. The typical athlete may not recognize that asthma is present and attribute breathing difficulty to a lack of adequate conditioning. However, by treating this condition the athletes are able to perform to their full potential.

In the past asthma was thought to be a psychological condition and thought not to be serious. We know these ideas were wrong. Asthma is real physical condition and is caused by inflammation of the airways of the lungs. It can be mild to severe. It can manifest itself as a mild cough or wheeze to a life threatening airway obstruction. Two football players, one professional and one college, died tragically in practices the summer 2002 from their asthma. In these instances, the athletes continued to exercise despite clear indications that their asthma was out of control.

Many people with asthma will often suffer increased chest congestion with exercise. Usually, this is worse in cold dry weather. Some individuals will have symptoms of asthma only with exercise. Usually, wheezing, chest tightness or coughing worsens one to ten minutes after exercising. Some people will note a "late phase" worsening of symptoms several hours after exercise.

How does one avoid having wheezing with exercise? Stopping exercise altogether is usually not an acceptable answer. First, keeping general asthma symptoms under good control is essential. Use of inhaled steroids or use of other prescribed medications may be needed. If asthma in general is not well controlled, exercise will always be a problem. If you need to use a "rescue" medication such as albuterol more than twice a week for asthma symptoms other than those caused by exercise, additional preventative treatment is needed. Wearing a mask or scarf in cold air to help warm and moisten the air can help many individuals. Warm up exercises performed for 30 minutes before vigorous exercise have been found to diminish the severity of exercise induced symptoms. Other recommendations include avoiding heavy exercise when air pollution is high, and if you are allergic when the pollen counts are high. A "common cold" can make asthma markedly worse, so exercise should be limited with a cold.

Inhalers with albuterol (Ventolin and Proventil), or metaproterenol (Alupent or Metaprel), pirbuterol (Maxair) and cromolyn sodium (Intal) or nedocromil (Tilade) used before exercise can often prevent wheezing. A long acting inhaler (Serevent or Foradil) used one-half to one hour before exercise may prevent wheezing for up to 12 hours, but if it is used regularly may partially lose part of their protective effect for exercise. Leukotriene modifiers (Singulair and Accolate) may also be very helpful if a daily medication is needed.

Although exercise induced asthma is a common condition it can usually be controlled with medications and simple precautions.