

Exercise & Asthma

This factfile covers:

- Exercise-induced asthma
- Special situations
- Adventure sports
- Where can I get more information?

Asthma should be no obstacle to exercise, playing sport and keeping fit. Many Olympic competitors, footballers and other high-level sportspeople have asthma, including several gold-medal winners.

Exercise-induced asthma

Exercise is a common trigger for asthma. It can affect anybody with asthma – children or adults, recreational sports players or elite athletes.

What are the symptoms of exercise-induced asthma?

Symptoms include coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and difficulty in breathing. Symptoms usually begin after exercise and worsen about 15 minutes after exercise stops. Research shows that if exercise is attempted again within three hours the symptoms are less severe.

Why can exercise trigger asthma?

It is not known exactly how exercise triggers asthma. When people exercise they breathe faster. This makes it more difficult for the nose and upper airways to warm and add moisture to the air breathed in, resulting in the air being drier and colder than usual. It is thought that this cold, dry air in the airways triggers the symptoms of exercise-induced asthma.

Diagnosing exercise-induced asthma

To help to diagnose exercise-induced asthma, your doctor may ask about your medical history and take peak flow tests. If the diagnosis is difficult to make or symptoms are having a large impact on life, other breathing tests performed in a hospital may be recommended, including an exercise test.

Managing exercise-induced asthma

Certain types of sport are more likely to trigger asthma:

- Long-distance or cross-country running are particularly strong triggers because they are undertaken outside in cold air without short breaks.
- Team sports such as football or hockey are less likely to cause asthma symptoms as they are played in brief bursts with short breaks in between.
- Swimming is an excellent form of exercise for people with asthma. The warm humid air in the swimming pool is less likely to trigger symptoms of asthma. However, swimming in cold water or heavily chlorinated pools may trigger asthma.
- Yoga is a good type of exercise for people with asthma as it relaxes the body and may help with breathing.

Asthma should not stop you doing any type of exercise as long as you:

- consult your doctor regularly
- keep your asthma well controlled
- take the correct medicine
- work up to your sport gradually.



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More information can be found in Asthma UK's *School Pack*.

Always consult your doctor before you plan to scuba-dive.

There are several steps that can be taken to help to reduce the symptoms of exercise-induced asthma. These should be used with any prescribed medicines.

- Warm up and down.
- Avoid the cold air. It may help to cover the nose and mouth with a scarf in the cold.
- Stay fit. Good aerobic fitness can help to reduce exercise-induced asthma

Special situations

At school

Full participation in PE and sport at school should be possible for all but the children most severely affected by asthma. Make sure that your child's teacher knows they have asthma. Teachers can help children to remember to warm up, warm down and bring their reliever inhalers with them when they play sport.

Competitive sport

None of the inhaled medicines commonly used for managing asthma are banned in competitive sports. However, their use may be restricted. If you play sport competitively you have to inform your sport's governing body about any asthma medicines you are taking and register them. They will also be able to provide you with details on which substances are banned.

Adventure sports

People with asthma may need to take special care when doing adventure sports. It is important that you contact your doctor before undertaking these activities. Always tell the instructor you have asthma and ensure that your reliever is easily accessible. You should mention your asthma on medical insurance, fitness declaration and medical waiver forms.

Scuba-diving

In recent years medical opinion has recognised that people with controlled asthma symptoms can take part in scuba-diving. However, if you have asthma you may have greater problems when scuba-diving because of the triggers to which you are exposed when you dive (cold air, exercise, stress, emotion).

Regulations on scuba-diving by people with asthma vary between countries. It is important that you check the regulations of a particular country before you plan to dive, as some do not allow anyone with asthma to scuba-dive. The British Sub-Aqua Club suggests that those with mild, controlled asthma may dive provided that:

- you do not have asthma that is triggered by cold, exercise, stress or emotion
- your asthma is well controlled
- you have not needed to use a reliever inhaler or had any asthma symptoms in the previous 48 hours
- your peak flow must be within 10% of your best value for at least 48 hours before diving.

You may also be asked to undertake an exercise test.



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For more information see the Asthma UK factfile *Altitude & Asthma*.

Mountaineering

The clean air of the mountain environment is ideal for those whose asthma is triggered by pollution. You are unlikely to be troubled by house-dust mites – a very common asthma trigger – as they cannot live at the low temperatures above ‘the snow line’.

The mountain environment contains several triggers for people with asthma (cold, dry air and exercise). If you are physically fit with well-controlled asthma and prepare adequately for your trip you should not be restricted in your activity. Always consult your doctor before planning a trip. Medical advice on mountaineering at high altitudes is available from the British Mountaineering Council.

Skiing

Skiing involves many of the same asthma triggers as mountaineering. Cross-country skiing is thought to be a stronger trigger for asthma than downhill skiing or mountaineering.

People with well-controlled asthma should be able to ski safely. You should make sure that your asthma is well controlled before you go. Always take your medicines with you when you ski and discuss your trip with your doctor in advance.

Parachute jumping

Always consult your doctor before planning a parachute jump or skydive. Medical advice on skydiving and parachuting is available from the British Parachute Association. As a general rule you can parachute jump or skydive if:

- your asthma is completely controlled
- cold air does not trigger your asthma
- exercise does not trigger your asthma

Where can I get more information?

British Mountaineering Council

177–179 Burton Road,
Manchester M20 2BB
www.thebmc.co.uk; 0161 445 6111
office@thebmc.co.uk

British Parachute Association Ltd

5 Wharf Way, Glen Parva,
Leicester LE2 9TF
www.bpa.org.uk; 0116 278 5271
skydive@bpa.org.uk

British Sub-Aqua Club

Telford's Quay, South Pier Road,
South Wirral, Cheshire CH65 4FL

www.bsac.com; 0151 350 6200
postmaster@bsac.com

Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI)

Unit 6 Unicorn Park, Whiteley Road
Bristol BS4 4EX
www.padi.com; 0117 971 1717

UK Sport

40 Bernard Street
London WC1N 1ST
www.uk sport.gov.uk; 020 7211 5100
info@uk sport.gov.uk



Asthma UK Adviceline

Ask an asthma
nurse specialist

0800 121 62 44

asthma.org.uk/adviceline

Asthma UK website

Read the latest independent
advice and news on asthma

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