

Don't let asthma keep you on the sidelines

Regular exercise is a vital component of a healthy lifestyle. Among many other benefits, exercise builds strong, healthy muscles and bones; bolsters cardiovascular health; helps maintain a healthy body weight; enhances psychological and emotional well-being; reduces the risk of various chronic illnesses; and promotes longevity. But for people with asthma, symptoms such as wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, or fatigue can interfere with the ability to participate fully in exercise and reap all of its healthy benefits.

The good news is, with proper symptom management and a little common sense, there's no reason asthma should stand in the way of enjoying a healthy, active lifestyle that includes regular exercise and, if desired, participation in competitive sports. The best way to start is to see an allergist for an evaluation and appropriate treatment plan.

What is the relationship between exercise and asthma? As allergist Dr. Syed Maseehur Rehman explains, "Asthma can be triggered by multiple things, the three major ones being exercise, infection, and allergies. Some people experience asthma symptoms only when they exercise while others develop symptoms in response to other triggers as well as exercise. It's very common for people with asthma to initially experience symptoms with exercise only and then to progress to the point where they have problems with other triggers as well."

Dr. Rehman points out that there is a lot of unnecessary confusion surrounding the use of the term "exercise-induced asthma," which suggests that asthma triggered by physical activity is somehow different from asthma triggered by allergens, infection, or other influences. He notes that most allergists view exercise-induced asthma not as a separate disease state but as the disease of asthma that happens to be triggered by exercise.

The type of sport or physical activity chosen can make a big difference in how well someone with asthma tolerates exercise. Activities involving longer periods of physical exertion, such as cross-country running, soccer, or basketball, may not be tolerated as well as those involving shorter or intermittent periods of exertion, such as baseball or volleyball. For instance, when running in open air, an athlete is likely to inhale a significant amount of outdoor allergens (pollen and mold) and environmental irritants (e.g., exhaust fumes, cold air), which can trigger asthma symptoms, causing breathing difficulties on top of the physical challenge of the exercise itself. Exerting in cold, dry air—e.g., while ice skating or playing ice hockey—can also be problematic for people with asthma. "Swimming, on the other hand, seems to be much better tolerated, likely owing to the warm, humid conditions, which discourage airborne pollen," Dr. Rehman adds.

The way asthma symptoms manifest themselves during exercise can vary from person to person and can help allergists determine the best course of action in treating the patient. Dr. Rehman notes that three particular scenarios seem to be common. With the first, the individual experiences breathing problems, has to stop exercising, and cannot resume the activity. In the second scenario, the individual has symptoms, stops for a while to rest and recover, and is then able to go back to the exercise. In the third scenario, the individual has symptoms, stops exercising for a while, resumes the exercise, and then has a delayed reaction to the exertion four to eight hours later.

Dr. Rehman emphasizes that with proper treatment, people who have asthma can compete at any level they strive to achieve. In mild cases, the use of a rescue inhaler before and during exercise or competition is often sufficient to keep symptoms under control. For more severe cases or when the individual needs to use a rescue inhaler with excessive frequency, preventive asthma medications may need to be prescribed. In either case, symptom control can be achieved.

"We've all seen elite professional or Olympic athletes with asthma who use a rescue inhaler immediately after competing and before talking to reporters. Yes, exercise is an asthma trigger, but that should not stop you from taking part in sports. Asthma can be managed, and allergists take pride in helping athletes with asthma perform their best," he says.

Along with using appropriate medications, there are additional steps people with asthma should take to reduce their risk of breathing difficulties while exercising or competing in sports. For example, taking time to gradually warm up before exercise and cool down afterward will prevent sudden body temperature changes, which can cause the airway to spasm. Also, drinking plenty of water will help prevent the airway from becoming dehydrated and going into spasm due to harder, faster breathing during exercise.

Most importantly, people with asthma must listen to their body when exercising and seek a type of exercise and level of exertion that is appropriate for them. Of course, they're also advised to adhere closely to their prescribed treatment regimen. If they should experience a severe asthma attack during exercise, it's critical to stop and seek medical help immediately.

Dr. Syed Maseehur Rehman

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