

Exercise and Asthma - A Healthy Combination

WHAT CAUSES AN ASTHMA ATTACK?

Asthma attacks can sometimes be caused by specific agents, such as pollens, dust mites, animal dander, drugs, food, wine, molds, fumes, smoke and chemicals. However, they may also be caused by emotional stress, exercise, exposure to cold or a viral respiratory infection. Because of this risk, many people diagnosed with asthma don't feel like exercising, and many others are afraid to because they think exercise might trigger an attack.

DO I HAVE EXERCISE-INDUCED ASTHMA?

For some, exercise may be the only cause of asthma symptoms. A history of cough, shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness, wheezing or endurance problems during exercise may suggest exercise-induced asthma. This often indicates the asthma is not properly controlled. Appropriate therapy can help eliminate these symptoms.

HOW DO I MANAGE MY ASTHMA?

The goal of asthma management is to allow you to participate in any activity you choose without experiencing symptoms. To help manage your asthma, follow these strategies:

1. Identify and eliminate asthma triggers.
2. Prevent and minimize attacks by taking medications as recommended by your doctor.

WHAT TYPES OF EXERCISE ARE BEST?

If you have been diagnosed with asthma, moderate intensity activities such as swimming, walking, biking or low impact aerobics may be a good place to start. The key is to select an environment that will help you avoid asthma triggers. For some, indoor activity works well while others may do well outdoors most of the time. Here are a few things to consider when choosing moderate intensity activities:

- A gradual aerobic warm-up of 5-10 minutes is essential. The warm-up helps the airways adjust to the increased demand, rather than having to instantly respond to a heightened need.
- Short bursts of activity, followed by short rest periods are sometimes better than a long period of heavy exertion.
- Many people with asthma find that aquatic activities are good because of the moist environment; however, some may have adverse reactions to chlorine and molds.
- If you need or want to exercise in the cold weather, wearing a mask may help keep the cold air from irritating the airways. Wearing a cotton or wool scarf without a mask may cause the inhalation of fibers which may, in turn, cause further problems.
- If you need or want to exercise outside during warmer weather, pollen counts are usually higher in the early morning. If this increases your risk of triggering asthma symptoms, choose an alternate time to exercise.
- Be flexible with your schedule and don't push yourself. If you are having a flare-up, take immediate care of your asthma symptoms.
- Judge the intensity of your exercise by using the "talk test" - if you can carry on a conversation while exercising, you are not exercising too hard. Slow down if you feel dizzy or faint. If you have to stop exercising suddenly, find a place to sit or recline in a comfortable position until your breathing has returned to normal.

References:

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute. (July, 1997). Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma. (Publication No. 97-4051). National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD: Author.
American College of Sports Medicine. (4th edition, 2001). Resource Manual for Guidelines for Exercise Testing and Prescription.