

Fitness with Asthma: Breathe and Have Fun

A Gold Medal Guide to Exercising with Asthma

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What do Olympic athletes Nancy Hogshead, Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Bill Koch have in common? They all have asthma. And they all have gold medals.

If you get asthma flare-ups when you break a sweat, you're not alone. More than 6 million kids and teens have asthma, and up to 90 percent of people have symptoms when they exercise (commonly called exercise-induced asthma or EIA). You don't have to cough and wheeze your way through a workout. With some simple planning you can manage your asthma. Who knows, you may one day find yourself stepping up on a podium to get a medal.

Know your flare-up signs

Can you tell when a flare-up is coming? Do you get certain early signs such as an itchy throat or a tight chest? If you sense a flare-up is about to happen:

- Let people around you know what's going on.
- Follow your asthma action plan.
- Stay calm.
- Use your rescue medication as your doctor instructed.

Your action plan should include:

- A list of early flare-up symptoms to watch for and what to do when they occur.
- Steps to take before you exercise.
- Emergency phone numbers and locations of emergency care facilities.
- A list of your triggers and how to avoid them.
- The names and dosages of all your meds and when and how they should be used.

Tips for dealing with your asthma

- Skip exercising if you have a cold or the flu or if you are having asthma symptoms.
- Warm up carefully before working out.
- Take your prescribed medication as close to the start of exercise as possible.
- Do not - do not! - skip your controller medications.
- Breathe through your nose during exercise.
- Take brief rests during your workout.
- Cool down after exercise.

- Carry rescue medication at all times (even during workouts) and use it as prescribed if symptoms start.

Talk with your doctor

- Review your action plan with your doctor. Make sure you understand it.
- If you have ideas for making your plan work better for you, talk about it.
- Talk about your pre-treatment and know what medication to take before exercise.
- Discuss how to manage your flare-ups and what rescue medications to take.
- Explain your activities, workouts and competitions. Your doctor may have some great strategies to help you manage your asthma and your experiences might help your doctor give advice to someone else.

Weather tips



Achoo: A recent cold may cause you to have more difficulty than normal with exercise. Take it slow and easy.

- Know what weather and air conditions affect your asthma and could cause flare-ups.
- If it's really cold outside, consider exercising indoors or wearing a ski mask or scarf around your nose and mouth.
- If there's a lot of pollen, mold or pollution that may trigger your asthma, move your workout inside.

Don't Hide!

You might feel shy or embarrassed about your asthma, but there's no need to. Make sure your coach and teammates know about your asthma, as well as the school nurse and athletic trainer. Help them understand when you need to stop working out and what steps to take if you have a flare-up.

Your turn

- What causes your flare-ups? What nicknames do you have for them?
- What was the scariest thing that ever happened to you?
- What was the most embarrassing moment?
- What advice would you give to a friend who just found out she has asthma?

Dear Diary

All elite-level athletes keep training diaries. They may record what they eat, how many hours they sleep, details of their workout, their heart rate, and how they feel. This helps them understand their body and what it's trying to tell them. It helps them figure out what works and what doesn't.

Think about keeping a training diary. You can note signs of your flare-ups, what triggers them (Cold air? A certain drill?), and what works best to treat them. You can describe warmups that worked great and ones that didn't work, as well as how you feel. Read back over your diary from time to time, and you may uncover tricks and tips to deal with your asthma.

Recommended activities

Some sports are less likely to trigger asthma flare-ups. Many of these, such as baseball, provide breaks in activity. Good activities include:

- Walking
- Jogging
- Hiking
- Golf
- Yoga
- Baseball
- Football
- Gymnastics
- Shorter track and field events
- Swimming (great because you breathe in warm, humid air)

Activities that you may find more challenging:

- Endurance sports (long-distance running, cycling)
- Sports that require high energy with little rest (soccer, basketball)
- Cold-weather sports (cross-country skiing, ice hockey)

Many athletes with asthma have found that with proper training and medication, they can participate in any sport they choose.

This article has been reviewed by BodiMojo expert Carolyn Butterworth.