

Physical Activity: What if my child has Asthma?



Advice for Parents / Carers

About this booklet

This booklet is for parents or carers of children and young people who have asthma. It explains the benefits of physical activity for your child and provides information to enable you to encourage your child to exercise safely. It aims to make sure your child is not discouraged from being active and attempts to overcome any anxieties your child may have about physical activity.

This booklet does not replace the advice that a health professional involved in the care of your child may give, based on their knowledge of your child's condition.



Is it safe for my child to exercise?

Yes, there are very few children and young people who will be advised not to do any physical activity and many people wrongly think that physical activity or exercise is not safe for anyone with asthma because it can trigger asthma symptoms.

For some children and young people, physical activity or exercise may be the only trigger of their asthma, this condition is known as **exercise-induced asthma**. For others, physical activity or exercise may be one of many triggers.

If physical activity or exercise is a trigger for your child it is understandable that you may worry about them taking part in physical activity or exercise and getting out of breath. However, there is no reason why most children and young people with asthma can not participate in any physical activity or sport they enjoy, as long as their asthma is under control.



Every child is different and most children who have asthma will know their triggers and limitations. However, you might want to get individual advice about your child's condition prior to encouraging your child to become more active. Your child's healthcare professional should be able to advise you if there any activities your child should avoid doing.

How much exercise is recommended for children and young people?



Public health guidelines recommend that children and young people up to 18 years old should do at least 60 minutes, of at least moderate-intensity physical activity a day, every day of the week.

This recommendation applies to all children and young people, including those who have asthma. The 60 minutes can be built up by smaller amounts of activity during the day, for example 4 x 15 minutes.

What are the benefits of regular physical activity and exercise?

There is lots of evidence that regular physical activity benefits long-term health. This applies to everyone, including children and young people with asthma.

Some of the general benefits of regular physical activity include:

- ♥ Improves health by helping to maintain a healthy heart, develop strong lungs, muscles and bones.
- ♥ Helps maintain a healthy body weight.
- ♥ Helps to reduce stress and anxiety.
- ♥ Improves your child's self esteem and helps them feel good about themselves.



- ♥ Provides opportunities for you child to mix with others, make friends and can help improve your child’s social skills.
- ♥ Improves emotional wellbeing.

Why should I encourage my child to be physically active?

In addition to the general benefits, regular exercise and physical activity programmes have important benefits for children and young people with asthma.

Exercise programmes can:

- ♥ Help improve lung function by strengthening the breathing muscles in the chest which can have important long-term effects.
- ♥ Enable children to better manage their asthma during periods of exercise.
- ♥ Enable children to cope better with everyday activities as they will become fitter and will have increased stamina.
- ♥ Help reduce anxiety children have about their condition.

What can I do to encourage my child to be physically active?

Everyone should try to do regular physical activity, however if your child has poorly controlled asthma they should see their doctor or asthma nurse before becoming more active.

- ♥ **Be positive about their condition**

Asthma should not be an obstacle to being active or playing sport. Many Olympic athletes, professional footballers and high level sportspeople have asthma.



♥ **Ensure your child is adequately prepared for their activity**

- Make sure that your child takes their asthma medications correctly and regularly.
- Ensure your child has their reliever inhaler close by during physical activity.
- If your child has Exercise-Induced Asthma (EIA), then make sure they take their reliever inhaler just before they start to warm-up. EIA symptoms usually begin after exercise and get worse about 15 minutes after the activity has stopped—so teach your child to stop exercising as soon as they experience any symptoms.

♥ **Encourage your child to try a range of activities**

Encouraging your child to understand how their body responds to different kinds of physical activity is all part of them learning how to manage their condition. Most children and young people will be keen to try out new activities. Providing opportunities for your child to try a variety of activities will allow them to find ones they enjoy and those they can cope with better. E.g. try simple activities such as dancing, Frisbee, ball or team games.

♥ **Try to be more active as a family**

Children who have physically active parents are more likely to be active themselves. Be a good role model for your child and get the whole family involved in some physical activity. For example, simply walking more often can help them see that you value physical activity. Where possible allow your child to walk or cycle to the shops, school, go for family outings to the local park, play area or may be go swimming together.



♥ **Teach your child to warm-up and cool-down**

An extended warm-up before (at least 10 minutes), and a gradual cool-down after, physical activity will help slow the change of air temperature in the airways which may help reduce the likelihood of developing symptoms and will help your child keep their asthma symptoms under control.

♥ **Try to reduce your child's exposure to triggers**

It can be difficult to identify exactly what triggers your child's asthma, but if you are aware of any triggers to your child's asthma try to avoid these. For example, in cold weather, ensure they cover their mouth and nose with a scarf, avoid dusty sports equipment, avoid swimming pools which are heavily chlorinated, avoid outdoor activities when pollen levels are high or during grass cutting.

♥ **Arrange regular asthma reviews with your child's doctor or asthma nurse**

Make sure your child has their own personal asthma plan or school asthma card and that their school and any club coaches have a copy. If your child's condition or treatment changes inform their school and update their card. Asthma UK have produced a downloadable school asthma card.

Visit: www.asthma.org.uk

What are the symptoms to look out for when my child is exercising?

It's OK and 'normal' for your child to feel warm, breathe harder, look 'flushed' and feel his or her heart beat faster during exercise.

BUT your child should stop exercising if they:

- ♥ **Start coughing or wheezing.**
- ♥ **Start to become short of breath or**
- ♥ **Feel tightness in the chest.**
- ♥ **Have difficulty speaking in short sentences.**

REMEMBER not everyone will show all of these symptoms and the severity and duration of symptoms will be highly variable, not just between different children and young people, but also between separate attacks.

If you notice any of the above signs or symptoms:

- ♥ Get your child to stop and rest immediately.
- ♥ **NEVER** push your child to continue as asthma symptoms will often get worse once they have stopped exercising so insisting that your child keeps going until they are forced to rest can be dangerous.
- ♥ Give them their reliever inhaler immediately.
- ♥ Sit your child up and slightly forward— Do not lie them down.
- ♥ Loosen tight clothing.
- ♥ Stay with them and reassure them.

If there is no immediate improvement, continue to make sure your child takes two puffs of their reliever inhaler every minute for five minutes.

If your child's symptoms do not improve in five minutes call 999.

If your child's lips are blue or if they seem too breathless or exhausted to talk or you are in any doubt call 999.

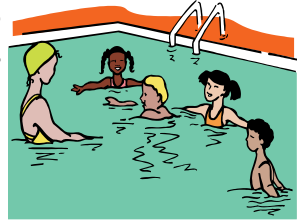
Continue to give your child one puff of their reliever inhaler every minute until the ambulance arrives.

What types of activity are 'best' for my child?

Certain types of physical activity and exercise are better for people with asthma than others. Of course every child's condition is different, but if their asthma symptoms are controlled, there is no reason why they cannot participate in any activity they want to.

Overleaf are some examples of activities that are best suited for children and young people with asthma.

♥ **Swimming** – is an excellent activity for people with asthma. The warm humid air is less likely to trigger symptoms. BUT, take care in cold or heavily chlorinated pools as these can be a trigger for some children.



♥ **Interval-type activities** that involve bursts of activity followed by activity at a reduced pace will be much better tolerated by children with asthma. These types of activities can be useful for gradually improving stamina, without causing discomfort and difficulties. Examples include relay races, tag/chasing games, jumping activities.

♥ **Team sports or games** — such as football, hockey, rounders are good activities for children and young people with asthma as they are played in brief bursts with short breaks in between so less likely to cause asthma symptoms.

♥ **Racket and net sports** — for example tennis, badminton, table tennis or volleyball are less likely to trigger asthma symptoms as they can be played with brief intervals.

♥ **Gymnastics and dancing** are great activities for children with asthma as the intensity can be controlled by the individual and regular active rest periods can be included.

♥ **Cycling, rollerblading or skateboarding** are great fun and your child can be in control of how fast or slow they want to go!



REMEMBER: Interval-type activities with rest periods should still involve some movement (active rest), but at a slower pace. **Complete rest between intervals is not advised as this can trigger exercise-induced asthma.**

Are there any exercises or activities that my child should avoid?

There are certain activities that are likely to be more problematic for some children and young people with asthma. For example long distance or cross-country running, outdoor or adventure activities.

- ♥ Long distance or cross-country running can be a strong trigger because they are undertaken outside in cold air without breaks.
- ♥ Some adventure sports or outdoor activities may induce asthma symptoms. This is more likely to be related to emotional and environmental factors associated with the activity than the activity itself. For example, excitement, anxiety, stress, weather, altitude.

Asthma UK recommend that your child's doctor is contacted and advice sought prior to participation in any adventure sports.

What about taking part in PE, sports and physical activity at school?

Taking part in physical education and other physical activities at school is important for your child, both for their long-term health and well-being and their social integration into school life.

Encourage your child to take part in PE and physical activity at school and in after-school clubs – at their own pace and within their own limitations.



Here are some of the ways in which you can help:

- ♥ Remind your child to take their medicines regularly, especially their preventer inhaler, and to keep their reliever (blue) inhaler with them at all times.
- ♥ Make sure that the school always has a spare reliever inhaler for your child. Check expiry dates often and replace when needed.
- ♥ Keep your child's teachers and after-school club leaders/coaches informed about your child's asthma, what their triggers are, any recent attacks, changes in their condition or medication. Asthma UK produce a school asthma card which is ideal for this. Visit: www.asthma.org.uk
- ♥ It might help put your mind at rest if you discuss any concerns you have regarding your child's involvement in PE with the teacher or school nurse.

What else can I do to encourage my child to be active?



- ♥ Encourage your child to build up the amount of activity they do gradually.
- ♥ Encourage your child to be physically active throughout the day, aiming for at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day.
- ♥ Select activities and/or sports carefully, according to your child's needs and abilities so as to avoid your child becoming disheartened over difficulties and discomforts.
- ♥ Remember that your child does not have to be 'sporty' or join a team or a gym in order to take part in physical activity. Walking or dancing to their favourite music, for example, are excellent forms of exercise and cost nothing.

♥ If your child enjoys sport, that is fine, but if they don't it really doesn't matter. Just find another way to keep them active doing something they enjoy.



♥ Encourage your child to try out new activities with their friends.

♥ Try to limit the amount of time that your child spends on sitting-down activities, such as watching the television/DVDs, playing computer games, to no more than 2 hours per day.

REMEMBER: Any activity is better than none at all!

It is important to encourage children and young people to participate in physical activities that are appropriate for their age, that are enjoyable and that offer variety .

Check out sports clubs and physical activities in your local area, visit: www.activeplaces.com

For more information on:

♥ Heart health visit the British Heart Foundation (BHF):

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the nation's heart charity, saving lives through pioneering research, patient care and vital information. <http://www.bhf.org.uk>

- Over-11s: <http://www.yheart.net/Over 11's>
- Under-11s: <http://www.bhf.org.uk/Under 11's>

♥ Physical Activity visit the BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health (BHFNC) website:

<http://www.bhfactive.org.uk>

♥ Asthma UK is the charity dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the 5.4 million people in the UK whose lives are affected by asthma:

<http://www.asthma.org.uk>

♥ Places to be active visit the Active Places website:

<http://www.activeplaces.com>

The BHF and BHFNC produce a number of resources on physical activity for parents and young people:

'*Get Kids on the Go*' is a booklet designed for parents and includes tips and tools for encouraging children to be active.

'*Pocket Play Pack*' is a small z-card with lots of activity ideas for children.

To obtain a free copies of these resources simply call 01604 640016 or email: ds-bhf@mail.dataforce.co.uk