



## Exercise-induced asthma is a common but manageable condition

An estimated 1 in 15 Americans suffers from asthma. Many things can trigger the inflammatory response characteristic of asthma and cause narrowing of airways into and out of the lungs. When the narrowing is severe, it produces an asthma attack that can be a serious medical emergency. Typical asthma triggers are allergens such as pollen, dust mites, cockroach waste and animal dander.

Exercise can also provoke asthma in some people. Studies have reported that exercise-induced asthma, or EIA as it is often abbreviated, is extremely common among some types of elite athletes.

**Question:** Which types of athletes are most affected?

**Answer:** Skaters, cross-country skiers and others who train in cold, dry air often deal with this problem. Studies have found that half of cross-country skiers and 43 percent of speed skaters have experienced some degree of EIA. This condition is less common in athletes involved in warm-weather sports, but the incidence is still significant. For example, 16 percent of cross-country run-

ners in the 1996 Atlanta summer Olympics were found to have EIA.

**Q:** What are the symptoms?

**A:** Dr. William Storms at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Colorado Springs lists symptoms as "cough, wheezing, shortness of breath or chest tightness during or after exercise." Symptoms can be more subtle, causing a person to just feel out of shape. A recent article by Storm in the journal *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise* reports that even headaches, abdominal pains, muscle cramps, fatigue or dizziness can be EIA-related.

Dr. David Nieman at Appalachian State University finds that EIA symptoms are often most severe five to 10 minutes after stopping exercise, with an attack typically lasting five to 10 minutes. Symptoms then gradually decline within an hour. For some reason, if exercise is continued again after symptoms decline, airway tightening and EIA symptoms are typically lessened.

**Q:** How is EIA diagnosed?

**A:** Generally, proper diagnosis requires a full physical exami-

nation that includes tests of lung function. Often, physicians use tests that expose the athlete to conditions similar to their usual setting for training and competition.

**Q:** How can someone exercise if they have EIA?

**A:** Nieman says staying fit with regular exercise can actually reduce the frequency of attacks. He recommends that those with EIA regularly monitor air flow with a peak-flow meter, avoid known allergenic triggers and use their medication prior to exercising.

Also, making some adjustments in exercise habits can help:

- » Adequate warm-up and cool-down periods
- » Repeated short bouts of exercise, less than five minutes each, rather than long, continuous bouts
- » Breathing through the nose as much as possible, which humidifies air better than breathing through the mouth

There is also some evidence that staying hydrated with plenty of fluids helps reduce asthma in general.

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Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS  
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,  
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.  
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.

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