



Exercise and asthma

Regular exercise is one of the best things you can do for your health. It helps keep your body strong, supports mental wellbeing and improves lung health. Exercise can even increase lung capacity, making everyday activities and workouts feel easier.

Exercise-induced bronchoconstriction

Exercise-induced bronchoconstriction (EIB), sometimes called exercise-induced asthma, is common. It affects:

- Up to 90% of people with asthma
- Up to 50% of competitive athletes
- Around 18–26% of school children

EIB happens when exercise triggers symptoms such as coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, or tightness in the chest.

The good news? With good asthma control, most people can safely participate in all types of exercise.

Why exercise can trigger asthma symptoms

Your nose warms, moistens and filters the air you breathe.

During exercise, people often breathe faster and deeper through their mouths letting cold, dry air and irritants like pollen, allergens and pollution reach the lungs.

This can trigger asthma symptoms, usually after exercise.

Factors that can increase symptoms

Duration

Longer activity can increase risk

Intensity

Endurance sports, such as long-distance running, are more likely to trigger symptoms

Environment

- High pollen levels
- Air pollution
- Chemicals, such as chlorine in swimming pools
- Cold, dry air

Being aware of these factors can help you plan your exercise and reduce symptoms.



Before exercising

- Take your preventer medicine daily, or as prescribed
- Let coaches, trainers, or friends know you have asthma, where you keep your reliever, and your Asthma Action Plan
- Use your reliever inhaler (e.g. Airomir, Asmol, Bricanyl, Epaq, or Ventolin) 5–10 minutes before warming up
- Warm up for 10–15 minutes with light exercises and stretching
- Have your reliever with you during exercise

If symptoms occur during exercise

- Stop exercising immediately
- Use your reliever inhaler and follow Asthma First Aid or your personal Asthma Action Plan
- Rest until fully recovered

- Only return to activity when you feel fully ready
- Seek medical help immediately if symptoms do not improve or worsen

After exercising

- Cool down slowly with light activity and gentle stretching
- Monitor for any asthma symptoms
- Use your reliever if symptoms appear
- Talk to your health professional if symptoms happen often

Competitive sports

Many athletes successfully manage their asthma while performing at the highest level. If you compete, check the rules of your sporting organisation about inhaled medicines.

Sources:

1. American Lung Association. *Being Active with Asthma*. 2026.
2. Lung Health Foundation. *How Fitness Influences Lung Capacity and Overall Health*. 2024.
3. Better Health Channel. *Asthma and exercise*. 2022.

How we can help

Respiratory Care WA has a team of respiratory healthcare professionals here to provide information and support for Western Australians living with asthma and COPD. We offer in-person education and support at our respiratory hubs or via telehealth. Our team can also visit schools, workplaces or community and sporting groups to deliver free asthma management sessions. Email ask@respiratorycarewa.org.au to find out more.