

In Good Health

Asthma

In 2006, over 2.2 million Australians had diagnosed asthma, an inflammatory disorder in which the air passages of the lungs become inflamed, sensitive and narrow, making it hard to breathe.



There is no known cause for asthma, however there have been a number of 'triggers' identified, which can lead to an episode of asthma symptoms (known as an asthma attack). The major triggers appear to be common allergens, including dust mites, pollens, animal fur and mould spores. Other triggers include tobacco smoke, chemicals found in certain foods, changes in weather and viral infections. In some cases, exercise can also bring about or worsen asthma symptoms.

Poorly controlled asthma can restrict participation in normal physical and social activities, so it is important to learn to manage this condition. In order to lead as normal a life as possible, with fewer asthma attacks and lesser symptoms, asthma sufferers need to be aware of the triggers that affect them, and limit their exposure to these triggers.

Exercise

It is a common myth that having asthma means not being able to participate in sports, when in fact many of Australia's great athletes have asthma. The truth is that people with asthma should be able to participate in any sport, the only exception being scuba diving. However you should always check with your doctor first, as individual cases may vary.

Most people with asthma find they will have worsened asthma symptoms if they exercise in dry or cold air. This is called exercise-induced asthma (EIA), and even someone with well-managed asthma may still get EIA.

The precautions for exercising depend on what medications are being used to control asthma symptoms, but it is usually recommended to use a reliever or preventer medication 5 to 10 minutes before warming up – your doctor can tell you more about this. It is important to always warm up before starting any exercise, and to have your medication with you when playing sport in case you need it.

It is good to maintain a high level of overall fitness if you have asthma. It won't prevent you from getting EIA, but it means you will have to work a lot to bring on an episode of EIA. Swimming is often recommended as a good form of exercise, especially for those with severe asthma, as the air you breathe whilst swimming is moist and therefore puts less pressure on your breathing. It is also a good idea to take regular breaks to 'catch your breath' when exercising hard or for long periods of time.



Food

Despite the beliefs of many, food is not actually a common trigger for asthma; in fact foods, drinks and chemicals found in foods affect less than 5% of those with asthma. And whilst studies are still ongoing, there has been no conclusive evidence to support the use of dietary supplements, including probiotics and antioxidants, in the treatment of asthma.

It is often thought that dairy products produce mucus in the airways, and that it is therefore wise for those with asthma to avoid dairy. This is in fact not the case though – there has been no clinical evidence to prove that reducing or emitting dairy from the diet will improve asthma symptoms or management. People with asthma should maintain a healthy diet encompassing a wide range of nutritious foods, including dairy which provides calcium, riboflavin, protein and vitamins A and B12.



Managing your Asthma

There are many aspects which must be considered to effectively manage asthma. An asthma action plan will help the asthma sufferer (or carer) to recognise when asthma is worsening, and respond appropriately. Asthma action plans are tailored to suit the individual, and provide a written record on identifying worsening control over asthma symptoms and clear instructions for how to respond to a negative change in the control of asthma symptoms. Speak to your doctor to organise a detailed, written asthma action plan tailored to suit your condition and needs.

- **Take the asthma medications prescribed by your doctor as instructed, even when you are feeling well**
- **Follow your written asthma action plan**
- **Make note of what triggers your asthma and try to avoid these triggers when possible**
- **Visit your doctor regularly for checkups and to monitor your asthma management**

Hydration

“ The human body is made up of 55 to 75 per cent water. This water forms the basis of blood, digestive juices, urine and perspiration and is contained in lean muscle, fat and bones. The body can't store water, so the only way to make up for the daily loss of water through the lungs, skin, urine, sweat and faeces, is to drink more water. ”

The amount of water each individual will need depends on several factors, including climate, activity levels and metabolism. It is important to drink enough water to prevent dehydration and to maintain energy levels and peak performance.

The most obvious signs of dehydration are thirst and a dry mouth; as dehydration gets worse, you may notice symptoms which include dizziness or feeling faint, headache, warm skin, or cramping in the arms or legs. Other notable signs of severe dehydration include:

- Rapid pulse
- Flushed, warm skin
- Dark yellow urine
- Urinating less than usual
- Sunken eyes
- Fainting or dizziness
- Loss of skin elasticity
- Irritability, drowsiness and irrational behaviour
- Absence of tears when crying

What to drink?

Water is the ideal fluid to hydrate your body with. Water is free from fat, sugar and other additives, is inexpensive and most easily converted to support bodily function.

For those struggling to drink the required amount of water each day, adding **cordial** can be helpful. However cordial is high in sugar, so be aware of this.

Sports drinks are high in sodium to enhance fluid absorption, high in sugar for carbohydrates, and replace electrolytes which may be lost through sweat. Sports drinks are best for high intensity work outs or hot, humid conditions causing high levels of perspiration. Be aware of the kilojoules and sodium content, and try not to drink them too often.

Foods such as watermelon, cucumbers, lettuce, peaches and zucchini all have high water content. Use them in salads or soups to fulfil part of your daily water intake requirements.

Some drinks to avoid are **coffee, cola and energy drinks**; the caffeine in them prevents them from being as well absorbed as other fluids.

If you find it hard to regularly get enough water, try these tips:

- Start the day with a cup of warm water with some fresh lemon juice, to really give your digestive system a boost.
- Try to limit caffeinated and alcoholic drinks, and instead drink water. Caffeine and alcohol act as diuretics, which actually cause you to lose water.
- Keep a water bottle on your desk so that you have easy access to water all day long. Make it a habit to drink water, and don't just leave it until you are thirsty.
- Keep track of how often you actually do drink water; and schedule it into your day if need be.
- If you think it is too cold to drink cold water, try warm water instead of dehydrating teas and coffee.
- Drink a glass of water before each meal, and have another on the table to drink with your meal.
- Eat loads of high water content fruit and veggies to easily up your daily intake.

Cycling Health benefits

Riding a bicycle is an aerobic activity which will get your heart, blood vessels and lungs working out. As well as improving overall fitness, cycling is great for:

- An aerobic workout without putting pressure on joints
- Increasing endurance and stamina
- Improving muscle tone and strength
- Helping to prevent heart diseases and diabetes
- Losing or managing weight
- Strengthening leg muscles and buttocks, in particular

Bike riding provides both the pleasure of being in the great outdoors as well as exercise, and even just a ride or two a week can make a big difference to your life. As cycling is a low impact activity, placing less stress on joints than other methods of exercise (i.e. jogging), it is suitable for people of all ages and fitness levels. In people of all ages cycling can reduce symptoms associated with arthritis, hypertension, asthma, depression and when combined with a good diet can help combat heart disease and diabetes.

Due to its low impact nature, bike riding is also a good form of rehabilitation; however you should always check with your doctor first.

Cycling is a great way to get outside and increase daily activity, save money and make a contribution towards reducing green house gasses with the additional benefits of helping you sleep, improving fitness, managing weight and reducing the risk of injury and disease.

Bicycle safety

Some tips to keep you safe while you are out riding:

- Unless specifically sign posted, or accompanying a child under 12, cyclists are not permitted on footpaths
- Riding is suitable for pregnant women and is easier than walking as the bicycle supports your weight. Check with your doctor first though, and don't ride too strenuously
- Take a bottle of water with you when you ride, and stay hydrated
- Be sun smart whilst riding: use sunscreen and cover up
- Always wear a helmet – it is required by law
- Choose a bike which is properly fitted to your size and riding requirements
- Take good care of your bike and regularly check brakes, tyres, chain and lights, which you'll need if riding in the dark
- Take care in wet conditions as your braking distance will be increased
- Ride safely, signal in advance and wear plain, bright colours so that motorists can easily see you
- Always warm up before riding and stretch out your muscles before going on a strenuous ride
- Make sure you are dressed appropriately – wear enclosed shoes and clothes which won't get stuck in the chain



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