

# Tips for school staff about physical activity for students with asthma

## Exercise is good for students with asthma

Like all students, those students who have asthma need exercise and physical activity to stay healthy and feel good. Regular physical activity is part of good management for asthma.



## But exercise can also lead to asthma problems

While it's important for students with asthma to be physically active, exercise can cause asthma symptoms or make asthma symptoms worse:

- Asthma tends to make a person's airways irritated and swollen or inflamed. Hard breathing during physical activity can make the airways even more irritated.
- When airways are irritated and swollen, students can have asthma symptoms. These symptoms can include coughing, wheezing (breathing that sounds like whistling), very rapid breathing, shortness of breath, and a feeling of tightness in the chest.
- Asthma symptoms can be mild or severe. For students with asthma, breathing problems can turn into a serious emergency.

When a student is exercising, asthma symptoms might appear right away. Sometimes there is a short or long delay before the symptoms appear:

- Symptoms might not show up until after the student has been exercising for several minutes.
- Sometimes, asthma symptoms do not show until *hours* after the exercise has ended. For example, a student could exercise early in the day, and then have asthma symptoms related to this exercise later in the afternoon.

## You can help students with asthma stay active and exercise safely

It's vital for school staff to encourage students with asthma to participate in school sports and exercise programs. This document has tips that tell what you can do to help students who have asthma stay active and exercise safely.

### TIP # 1

Become familiar with the instructions on file for each student with asthma

Know which students have asthma. For each one, the school should have an Asthma Action Plan or other written set of medical instructions on file. Talk with the school nurse about these instructions. If your school does not have a school nurse, talk with the school administrator.

The instructions on file will help you learn:

- **What the student is supposed to do while at school to help keep asthma symptoms under control.** For example, the instructions might identify the student's asthma triggers (things the student should try to avoid because they tend to make asthma worse).
- **What to do if the student has an asthma attack.** For example, there should be instructions for locating and using the student's rescue inhaler if the student has an asthma attack. Some students have permission to carry their own inhaler. For other students, the inhaler is kept in the health room or school office.
- **Whether there are any special instructions related to sports or exercise.** For example, some students may have doctor's instructions to use their asthma rescue inhaler before they start to exercise. (This can help prevent asthma symptoms during exercise.)

**TIP # 2**

Know the common asthma triggers that can cause asthma problems

Each person with asthma has different triggers for symptoms, and these triggers can change over time. These are common asthma triggers:

- Exercise
- Tobacco smoke
- Pollen
- Other smoke or pollution in the air, including vehicle exhaust
- Dust
- Mold
- Animals with fur or feathers
- Breathing cold air
- Strong odors such as perfume, chemicals or cleaning products

**TIP # 3**

When students are having asthma problems, help them stay safe and active by adapting their activities

When students are having asthma problems, you can make exercising easier and safer for them by adapting the activity or finding an alternative. Here are some tips:

- To help students keep asthma symptoms under control, include a few minutes of gradual warm-up before exercise and a few minutes of cool-down afterward.
- Activities that involve a lot of running can sometimes lead to asthma symptoms or make asthma symptoms worse. If this happens, find other activities that involve less running.
- A cold or infection can make asthma symptoms worse. When students with asthma aren't feeling well, help them find an alternative physical activity.
- Breathing cold, dry air can irritate the airways and cause problems for people with asthma – *even if they are not exercising*. In cold weather, consider having alternative ways to get exercise.



**TIP # 4**

Make sure that each student's rescue inhaler is always readily available

People with asthma use a rescue inhaler to help bring quick relief when they have an asthma attack.

- Many students have permission to carry their own rescue inhaler. Find out if they have an extra inhaler that is kept at school in case a back-up is needed.
- If students do not carry their rescue inhaler with them, be sure that you know where it is kept and how to get it quickly if the student has an asthma attack.



**TIP # 5**

Know what to do when a student is having asthma problems

Asthma symptoms require immediate attention. These symptoms can turn into life-threatening emergencies.

- Be prepared. If you spend time with students who have asthma, be sure to get medication training from the school nurse or school district.
- If a student has asthma problems during exercise, have the student *stop exercising immediately, sit down, and rest*. The student may need to use his or her asthma rescue inhaler for quick relief.
- The last page of this document tells what to do if a student has an asthma attack. You can use this last page separately as a poster for easy reference.

**TIP # 6**

Be understanding and supportive of students with asthma

Students who have asthma can face social and emotional challenges at school:

- Having asthma symptoms or an asthma attack can be frightening, both to the student with asthma and other students who are nearby.
- Students with asthma may be fearful, embarrassed, and concerned about being criticized or teased. They may be reluctant to use medicine or to take part in exercise.

Students with asthma need reassurance and encouragement. Whatever their age, they need to know that they can count on their teachers, coaches, other school staff, and their fellow students for understanding and support.



**TIP # 7**

Work as a team to follow up on any asthma problems or concerns about a student's health

The best way to help a student manage asthma is to work as a team. Work with the student, the school nurse, and the student's parent or guardian to address any health-related issues that interfere with student's participation in sports and exercise. If your school does not have a school nurse, talk with the school administrator.



You have a **unique role in helping the student** because you can see first-hand how having asthma affects the student at school. Be sure to give a report to the school nurse or administrator whenever a student has problems related to asthma, or if you are concerned about the student's health.

On the next page:

A poster that tells what to do if a student has an asthma attack

# What to do if a student has an asthma attack

Be prepared. If you spend time with students who have asthma, be sure to get **medication training** from the school nurse or school district.

## 1 Stay calm. Have the student sit down.

Speak slowly and clearly. Help the student sit down and stay as calm and quiet as possible.

## 2 Give asthma medicine immediately. (puffs from the student's rescue inhaler)

Follow written instructions for giving this medicine (instructions should be on the label of the inhaler or in a written medical plan in the student's file).

The student's inhaler might be kept in the school office or health room. If you can't find the student's inhaler, call the parent or guardian immediately.

## 3 Keep watching constantly for any signs of an emergency.

An asthma attack can turn into an emergency *at any time*. Call 911 if you see *any* of the warning signs of an asthma emergency

## 4 Help the student relax and stay quiet.

Have the student breathe as slowly and deeply as possible. To make breathing easier, encourage the student to relax his or her shoulders.

## 5 If breathing doesn't improve, follow directions for giving more medicine.

The instructions on the inhaler or in the student's file will tell what to do if the student needs more medicine.

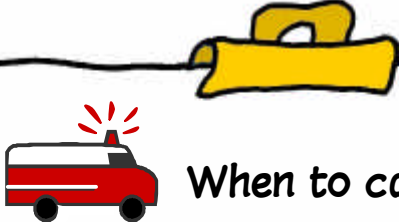
If breathing is not better within 15 minutes after the *first* puffs of rescue medicine – or if breathing starts getting worse -- call 911.

## 6 Report the asthma attack.

Follow your school's procedures for reporting asthma problems. Make sure that the student's parent or guardian is notified.

### Symptoms of an asthma attack:

- Shortness of breath or rapid breathing. The student may be afraid or panicky because it is hard to breathe.
- Coughing or wheezing. Wheezing means making a noise or whistling sound while breathing.
- Feeling of tightness in the chest.



### When to call 911

If you see *any* of these warning signs of an emergency, call 911 immediately:

- if** breathing is so difficult that the student has trouble talking or walking
- or** the student's lips or fingernails look gray or blue
- or** the inhaler rescue medicine is not helping  
(breathing should improve within 15 minutes after the first puffs from the inhaler)

If you call 911, stay with the student until help arrives, and call the student's parent or guardian.

**Not sure whether emergency help is needed?** If you are not sure, *do not hesitate* to call 911.