Understanding Exercised Induced Bronchoconstriction (EIB)

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An estimated 20 million people in the United States have asthma. Of that number, 9.4 percent are children. Asthma is primarily a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways that cause symptoms in the lungs and bronchial system (i.e. coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, rapid breathing, and chest tightness). 90 percent of those who have asthma also suffer from exercise induced bronchoconstriction (EIB). But not everyone who suffers from EIB has asthma. Healthy athletes and active lifestyle enthusiasts can also face the same breathing difficulties. Yes, EIB can also affect those without asthma, at any age. One study examined this more closely in an urban fitness center. The results were surprising: 19 percent of the 212 members studied had EIB. What's even more surprising is that not one person knew they had EIB at the time of the study!

In addition to typical asthma symptoms, athletes who have EIB may also experience: Excess mucus production during or after exercise, fatigue with exercise (feeling out of shape when you are not), a decrease in performance, sore throat during/after exercise, headaches and stomach cramps.

Exercise improves lung function and can even help manage the symptoms. But for the majority, exercise can also be the main trigger. Are we faced with a conundrum?

The good news is "no". Top U.S. athletes like Jerome Bettis (NFL), Kaitlin Sandeno (Olympic gold medalist/swimming), Jackie Joyner-Kersee(Olympic three-time gold medalist/track&field) and Amy Van Dyken(Olympic six-time gold medalist/swimming), all have asthma. In fact, a whopping 25 percent of the 2012 UK Olympic team has asthma! Did it stop Bradley Wiggins(Tour de France), Rebecca Adlington(swimmer) or Paula Radcliffe(marathoner) from peak performance? And for our Summit locals: Mountain bikers rank first in Olympic athletes with asthma! Obviously EIB does not stop them.

Don't let it stop you either. Although exercise can be a trigger, with the proper training and treatment, most EIB sufferers can participate in any sport they choose. However, how and where you exercise can make a big difference. Exercising in dry air, cold temperatures, high altitude, pollen, with respiratory infections or strong emotions, as well as starting out too intensely, can increase the likelihood of a trigger.

Tips for exercising with EIB:

- Breathe through your nose: Nose mucus contains more moisture than your mouth.
- Wear a face mask: Recirculates the moisture you exhale into the air you draw in.
- Warm up gradually, at least 5 to 15 minutes, at an intensity of 60 percent or less of your maximum heart rate. It may inhibit the inflammatory response for up to an hour.
- Workout inside: Decreases your exposure to pollen, pollution and cold temperatures on severe weather/ozone days.
- Have a positive attitude: Don't make it stressful. Find an exercise program that your brain and your body BOTH feel GOOD about.

You breathe better, you perform better. It's pretty simple. And with the right health and fitness program, even EIB sufferers can achieve peak performance.

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