



BHF National Centre  
**physical activity+health**

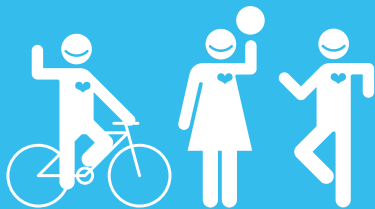
# Physical activity – **What if my child has asthma?**

Advice for parents and carers



**Loughborough**  
COLLEGE est. 1909

# If you have a child who has asthma, this booklet is for you.



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This booklet does not replace the advice that health professionals involved in the care of your child may give, as they know more about your child's condition.

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# About this booklet

If you have a child who has asthma, this booklet is for you.

The booklet:

- ♥ explains why it is good for your child to be physically active
- ♥ provides information to help you make it easy and enjoyable for your child to be active safely
- ♥ aims to make sure your child is not put off being active
- ♥ looks at the worries that you or your child may have about physical activity and how they can be overcome.

# Is it safe for my child to do physical activity?

Yes. There are very few children and young people who will be advised not to do *any* physical activity. Many people wrongly think that physical activity is not safe for anyone with asthma because it can trigger their asthma symptoms.

For some children and young people, physical activity may be the only trigger of their asthma. This is known as 'exercise-induced asthma'. For others, physical activity may be one of several triggers. And for others, physical activity is not a trigger at all.

If physical activity is a trigger for your child, it is understandable that you may worry about them taking part in physical activity and getting out of breath. But as long as your child's asthma is under control, they can take part in any physical activity they enjoy.

Every child is different and most children and young people who have asthma will know their triggers and limitations. However, you might want to get advice about your child's condition before encouraging your child to become more active. Your child's healthcare professionals should be able to advise you if there are any particular activities that your child should avoid.

# How much physical activity should my child do?

To improve health, experts recommend that all children and young people aged 5-17 years should do **at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day**. This applies to all children and young people, including those who have asthma.

Moderate-intensity activity is activity that may raise your child's pulse, and make them breathe slightly faster and feel a little warmer – for example, brisk walking, steady cycling, roller-skating or active play.

Vigorous-intensity activity is activity that makes your child 'huff and puff' and makes them feel sweaty – for example, organised games such as football and netball as well as activities such as running, fast cycling, swimming laps, and jumping and climbing over obstacles.

The 60 minutes activity doesn't have to be done all at once. It can be spread across the whole day by doing several shorter amounts of activity – for example, two short bouts of 15 minutes activity running around in the playground, combined with a longer bout of programmed activity such as PE or supervised recreational activity.

If your child is currently inactive, they should gradually increase the amount of physical activity they do, and should aim to eventually achieve the 60 minutes a day target. If your child is currently not doing any physical activity, doing some activity – even if it's below the recommended level – will bring more benefits than doing no physical activity at all. Any physical activity is better than none, and generally the more the better.



# What are the benefits of regular physical activity for my child?

There is lots of evidence that children and young people benefit from being physically active. This applies to all children and young people, including those with asthma.

Regular physical activity can:

- ♥ promote healthy growth and development
- ♥ help keep the heart and lungs healthy
- ♥ help develop strong muscles and bones
- ♥ improve balance and flexibility
- ♥ help achieve and maintain a healthy body weight
- ♥ make them feel good, improve their mood and help them cope with the stresses of everyday life
- ♥ improve self-esteem and body image
- ♥ provide opportunities to make friends
- ♥ build confidence and help develop social skills.

As well as the benefits listed on the previous page, regular physical activity has the following important **benefits for children and young people with asthma.**

- ♥ **It can help improve lung function** by strengthening the breathing muscles in the chest. This can have important long-term effects on breathing and asthma control.
- ♥ **It can help your child to manage their asthma better** during periods of physical activity, as they have increased lung capacity and better fitness.
- ♥ **It can help your child to cope better with everyday activities,** as they will have more stamina.
- ♥ **It helps reduce any anxieties** your child may have about their asthma, and give them confidence to manage their condition.
- ♥ **It can help your child reach or keep to a healthy weight.** This is particularly important, as children and young people who are overweight often need to take more medicine to control their asthma, and their asthma is usually less well controlled.



# What can I do to help?

All children and young people should try to do regular physical activity. However, if your child's asthma is poorly controlled, they should see their doctor or asthma nurse before they start becoming more active.

We can all play a vital role in supporting and encouraging children and young people to be more active.

## Be positive about your child's condition.

- ♥ Don't let asthma be an obstacle to your child being active. Many Olympic athletes, professional footballers and other high-level sportspeople have asthma – for example, Olympic swimmer Rebecca Adlington, the runner Paula Radcliffe, and the footballer Paul Scholes.

## Make sure your child is adequately prepared for physical activity.

- ♥ Make sure your child takes their asthma medicine correctly and regularly. Explain to them why this is important.
- ♥ Make sure your child has their reliever inhaler (usually a blue inhaler), and their spacer if they use one, close by them during physical activity.
- ♥ If your child's asthma is triggered by physical activity (exercise-induced asthma), make sure they take their reliever inhaler about 5 minutes before they begin the activity. The symptoms of exercise-induced asthma may start shortly after physical activity begins and usually get worse about 15 minutes after the physical activity has stopped. Taking their reliever inhaler before doing the activity can help prevent them getting these symptoms.
- ♥ Teach your child to stop being physically active as soon as they experience any symptoms of asthma, and to take their reliever inhaler. They can return to light activity once they feel fully recovered. They should wait at least 5 minutes. Sometimes high doses from the reliever can slightly increase the child's heartbeat or result in mild muscle shakes, but these effects are harmless and generally wear off after a short time.

## Try a range of different activities.

There are lots of different ways to be active and most children and young people will be keen to try out new activities.

- ♥ Encourage your child to try a range of different physical activities to find out which ones they enjoy and which ones they can cope with better.
- ♥ Trying out different activities will help your child understand how their body responds to various types of physical activity. This is all part of them learning how to manage their asthma.



## Try to be more active as a family.

Children and young people who have physically active parents are more likely to be active themselves.

- ♥ Be a good role model for your child. For example, simply walking more often can help your child see that you value physical activity.
- ♥ Make time to be active and have fun as a family. For example, go for a walk, play frisbee, have a kick-about in the garden or local park, or perhaps go swimming together.
- ♥ Providing opportunities for your child to be active with you may help build their confidence about being physically active with friends, and reassure them that it is safe for them to be active.

## Teach your child to warm up and cool down.

Your child should always warm up for at least 10 minutes before physical activity and cool down gradually afterwards.

Warming up means beginning physical activity slowly and building up gradually. Cooling down means taking time to slow down and not stopping physical activity suddenly.

An extended warm-up and gradual cool-down are important. They help slow the change of air temperature in the airways. This may help reduce the likelihood of your child developing asthma symptoms and will help keep their symptoms under control.



## Try to reduce your child's exposure to triggers.

It can be difficult to identify exactly what triggers your child's asthma.

- ♥ If you're aware of any triggers to your child's asthma, teach your child how they can avoid these. For example, in cold weather, make sure your child covers their nose and mouth with a scarf. In summer, avoid outdoor activities when pollen levels are high or during grass cutting.
- ♥ Avoiding triggers applies not just to when your child is being active. It also includes things like avoiding pets if your child is allergic to them, and avoiding cigarette smoke.

## Keep a record of what triggers your child's asthma.

- ♥ It may be a good idea for your child to keep a diary of any symptoms (such as wheezing, coughing, tightness in the chest, or difficulty breathing) together with any potential triggers they have been exposed to (such as pollen, traffic fumes or pets, or if they have a cold or cough). If your child is too young to do this themselves, you could keep a diary for your child. You may find it helpful to bring this diary along to the regular asthma reviews your child has (see the next page).

## Arrange regular asthma reviews with your child's doctor or asthma nurse.

- ♥ Arrange a regular asthma review with your child's doctor or asthma nurse. Your child should have a review at least once every six months, depending on their condition and how well their asthma is controlled.
- ♥ Make sure you have a personal asthma plan for your child.
- ♥ You may find it useful to fill in a *School Asthma Card* with the help of your doctor or asthma nurse, and to give this to your child's nursery, school or physical activity leaders. (See page 27.)



# Are some types of physical activity better than others for people with asthma?

You may need to think about the **type** of physical activity that your child can do, especially if your child is very limited by their asthma symptoms. Certain types of physical activity may be better suited to your child than others. But as long as your child's asthma is under control, they can take part in any physical activity they enjoy.

**Dynamic aerobic activities** – such as walking, cycling, swimming, dancing, fitness classes and adapted team games – are generally better for children and young people with asthma, as these can be done at low intensity and intermittently.

Also, children and young people with asthma tend to cope better with **'interval-type activities'**. That means activities that require bursts of activity interspersed with spells of activity at a slower pace – for example, relay races, tag or chasing or jumping games. With this type of activity, the child or young person can rest in between bursts of activity. Interval-type activities can be used to slowly improve your child's stamina, without causing them discomfort. At first your child may need longer rest periods, but these can be made shorter as their stamina improves.

**Activities with rest periods should still involve some movement, but at a slower pace. This is known as 'active rest'. Complete rest in between bursts of activity is not recommended.**

## Indoor swimming

Recreational indoor swimming is an excellent activity for children and young people with asthma, as they can do it at their own pace. Also, the warm, humid air in the swimming pool is less likely to trigger your child's asthma symptoms. However, your child should take care in heavily chlorinated or very cold pools, as these can be a trigger to asthma symptoms for some children and young people.

## Team games

Team games such as football, hockey, netball or volleyball are good activities for children and young people with asthma because they tend to involve brief bursts of playing at a higher intensity followed by active rest periods, so they are less likely to cause asthma symptoms. Some children and young people with asthma may struggle to complete a full game, but may be able to cope with an adapted game – for example, having more players on each team, or using a smaller play area.

## Racquet and net games

Racquet and net games such as badminton or table tennis are ideal activities for children and young people with asthma, as they involve brief bursts of activity. Badminton is ideal as the shuttlecock travels slowly and the court is quite small. Tennis and squash usually involve more constant activity and are faster paced. Your child may struggle to cope with a full game of tennis, but may find short tennis easier.

## Striking and fielding games

Activities such as cricket, softball and rounders may be ideal for children and young people with asthma. These games tend to include brief bursts of activity followed by short breaks. Also, the pace of the game can be adapted to suit different abilities.

## Gymnastics and dancing

Children and young people with asthma rarely experience any difficulties with gymnastics, aerobic dance or dancing. These are ideal activities, as they lend themselves to brief bursts of activity. Your child can set their own pace and can include active rest periods (see page 21).

**Complete rest in between bursts of activity is not advised, as this can trigger exercise-induced asthma.**

## Yoga, pilates and T'ai Chi

These are excellent activities for children and young people with asthma, as they relax the body and may help with breathing.

## Cycling, rollerblading and skateboarding

These activities can be great fun. They are perfect for children and young people with asthma as they can control how fast or how slow they want to go!

**Every child's and young person's condition is different. If you have any concerns or queries about your child being active, always ask your child's doctor or asthma nurse.**

# Are there any types of physical activity that my child should avoid?

Some types of physical activity may present problems for some children and young people with asthma due to the environment in which they take place – for example, long-distance or cross-country running, adventure sports or outdoor activities.

- ♥ Long-distance or cross-country running can be a strong asthma trigger because they are done outside, sometimes in cold air and without rest breaks. There is also less opportunity to see how the child or young person is coping with the activity.
- ♥ Some adventure sports or outdoor activities may bring on asthma symptoms. This is more likely to be related to emotional or environmental factors associated with the activity than the activity itself – for example, excitement, anxiety, stress, weather, high pollen count and altitude.

**Asthma UK recommends that you contact your child's doctor and seek advice before your child takes part in any adventure sports.**



# What about taking part in PE, sports and physical activity at school?

Taking part in Physical Education (PE) and other physical activities at school is important for your child, both for their long-term health and well-being and to make sure they are fully involved in school life.

## How you can help

- ♥ Teach your child the importance of taking part in PE and physical activity at school and in after-school clubs. Encourage them to take part at their own pace and within their own limitations.
- ♥ Remind your child to take their medicines regularly, especially their preventer inhaler, and to keep their reliever inhaler (usually blue) and spacer with them at all times.
- ♥ Make sure that the school always has a spare reliever inhaler and spacer for your child. Check the expiry date on inhalers regularly and replace them when needed.
- ♥ Keep your child's teachers and physical activity leaders (for example, after-school club leaders or sports coaches) informed about your child's asthma, particularly about what triggers their asthma and how best to avoid those

triggers. Make sure your child's nursery, school or physical activity leader has written information about your child's triggers and symptoms, their inhaler, your emergency contact details and how to recognise if your child is having an asthma attack and what to do about it. Asthma UK produces a *School Asthma Card* and a *Pre-school Asthma Card*, which are ideal for this. They also produce an *Asthma Attack Card* which can be used by physical activity leaders. To order these, visit [www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk) or call Asthma UK on 0800 121 6255.

- ♥ Let your child's teachers and physical activity leaders know about any recent asthma attacks your child has had, or changes in their condition or medicines. Make sure their personal asthma plan or *School Asthma Card* is updated or exchanged.
- ♥ It might help put your mind at rest if you discuss any concerns you have regarding your child's involvement in PE with your child's teacher or school nurse.
- ♥ Ask about the school's asthma policy (or their medical conditions policy). For example, you might want to ask about their policy on access and storage of pupils' inhalers; whether staff have had training in asthma awareness (knowing what to do if a child has an asthma attack, and how to avoid asthma triggers); or whether teachers will always let parents or carers know if a child has an asthma attack or has needed to use their reliever inhaler more often than usual during school time.

# What are the symptoms to look out for when my child is active?

It's OK and 'normal' for your child to feel warm, breathe harder, look 'flushed' and feel his or her heart beat faster during physical activity.

## Your child should stop doing the activity if he or she:

- ♥ starts coughing or wheezing
- ♥ starts to become short of breath
- ♥ feels tightness in the chest
- ♥ has difficulty speaking in short sentences
- ♥ is unusually quiet and quite still
- ♥ has tummy ache (sometimes in younger children)
- ♥ has cyanosis (a blue tinge to the skin or lips). This is a sign of a lack of oxygen in the blood, and indicates the need for urgent medical attention.

Your child may not have all of these symptoms. Also, how severe the symptoms are and how long they last for may vary greatly between separate asthma attacks.

## What to do

If you notice any of the signs or symptoms opposite:

- ♥ Get your child to stop and rest immediately.
- ♥ **Never** push your child to continue their activity. Asthma symptoms will often get worse once activity is stopped, so insisting that your child keeps going until they are forced to rest can be dangerous.
- ♥ Give your child one or two puffs of their reliever inhaler (usually blue) immediately, preferably through a spacer.
- ♥ Sit your child up and slightly forward. **Don't** lie them down or hug them.
- ♥ Encourage them to take slow, steady breaths.
- ♥ Loosen tight clothing.
- ♥ Stay with them and reassure them.
- ♥ If there is no immediate improvement, continue to make sure your child takes two puffs of their reliever inhaler every two minutes, taking up to 10 puffs.
- ♥ If your child's symptoms don't improve after 10 puffs, or if you are worried at any time, call 999 for an ambulance.
- ♥ If an ambulance does not arrive within 15 minutes and your child is not improving, give further doses of their reliever inhaler. Make sure your child takes two puffs of their reliever every two minutes, taking up to 10 puffs.

# What else can I do to encourage my child to be active?

- ♥ Teach your child to slowly build up the amount of physical activity they do.
- ♥ Encourage your child to be physically active throughout the day, aiming for at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.
- ♥ Choose physical activity carefully. Try to match activities to your child's likes, needs and abilities, so they don't become disheartened over any difficulties and discomforts.
- ♥ Remember that your child doesn't have to be 'sporty' or join a team or a gym in order to take part in physical activity. Walking or dancing to their favourite music are excellent forms of physical activity and cost nothing.
- ♥ Find different ways of keeping your child active, and encourage them to take part in activities they enjoy.
- ♥ Encourage your child to try out new activities with their friends.

- ♥ Try to limit the amount of time that your child spends on sitting-down activities – such as watching TV or DVDs, or playing computer games – to no more than two hours a day.
- ♥ Set a good example and try to be more active as a family. Where possible, allow your child to walk or cycle to the shops and school.
- ♥ Praise and reward your child for being active. Be positive about their achievements, big or small, and reward them for persistence and taking part.





## Remember:

It's important to encourage your child to take part in physical activities that are appropriate for them. Activities should be enjoyable and offer variety.

Some physical activity is better than nothing at all! And generally the more the better.



# For more information

## Asthma

### **Asthma UK**

[www.asthma.org.uk](http://www.asthma.org.uk)

Asthma UK Adviceline: 0800 121 6244

Asthma UK is the charity dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the 5.4 million people in the UK whose lives are affected by asthma.

## Encouraging your child to be more active

### Publications

#### **Get Kids on the Go**

*BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health*

This booklet includes tips and tools for encouraging children to be active.

#### **Pocket Play Pack**

*BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health*

A small z-card with lots of activity ideas for children.

For free copies of these resources:

- ♥ call the BHF Orderline on **0870 600 6566**
- ♥ email [orderline@bhf.org.uk](mailto:orderline@bhf.org.uk) or
- ♥ visit [bhf.org.uk/publications](http://bhf.org.uk/publications)

## **Active Places**

[www.activeplaces.com](http://www.activeplaces.com)

A website that allows you to search for sports facilities anywhere in England.

## **BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health (BHFNC)**

[bhfactive.org.uk](http://bhfactive.org.uk)

Funded by the British Heart Foundation, the BHFNC develops resources to support professionals in promoting physical activity. The BHFNC has also produced a number of resources on physical activity for parents and carers and for children and young people.

## **Heart health**

### **British Heart Foundation**

[bhf.org.uk](http://bhf.org.uk)

For over-11s: [yheart.net](http://yheart.net)

For under-11s: [bhf.org.uk/cbhf](http://bhf.org.uk/cbhf)

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) is the nation's heart charity, saving lives through pioneering research, patient care and vital information.

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This booklet is one of a series of booklets about physical activity for children and young people with different medical conditions. The British Heart Foundation, the BHF National Centre for Physical Activity and Health, and Loughborough College are keen to encourage physical activity in all children and young people and have worked closely with Asthma UK to produce this booklet.

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