

## Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

*For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.*

*These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.*

# ASTHMA

## General Information

### Facts and Figures

- Asthma is the most common childhood respiratory disorder;
- Asthma accounts for ¼ of the reasons for absences from school;
- Asthma affects people to varying degrees - ranging from mild to severe;
- People with severe asthma may experience difficulties with routine daily activities.

### What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic lung condition which is characterized by restricted airways, causing difficulty with breathing. The airways are affected by both tightening and inflammation of the muscles. This is often triggered by allergens (pollens, pet dander, moulds, etc.) as well as irritants (smoke, strong smells, cold air, etc). Symptoms can include wheezing, coughing, shortness of breath, and feelings of tightness in the chest.

People with asthma often have difficulty breathing and performing activities in certain situations. Most people with asthma must take medications on a regular basis to control inflammation. These "controller" medications are different from the "reliever" medications used to treat an attack.

Symptoms of asthma can often occur as a result of stress to the body (i.e. physical exertion, fear, excessive laughter or excitement). Symptoms of asthma can also occur as an allergic response to pollen, grass and animals, or due to irritants such as perfume and cigarette smoke.

## **Impact of Asthma**

Asthma attacks usually begin with shortness of breath, which is a sign of the need for immediate treatment. This typically includes administering an inhaler. If not treated appropriately, symptoms may progress to:

- Severe wheezing;
- Coughing;
- Possible lack of the ability to breathe all together.

## **Working with a person who has Asthma**

### **Tips for Getting Active**

It's helpful to know ahead of time what an individual with asthma uses to manage symptoms in the event of an attack. Be aware of where the person's medication/inhaler is at all times. If an attack occurs, retrieve the person's medication/inhaler, remove them from the crowd, and help them to calm down and relax while they recover. Be sensitive to how frustrating it must be to have to stop the activities that they enjoy, and how embarrassing it must feel to have others around to witness their asthma attack.

When working with a person who has asthma, consider the following:

- Participation in regular physical activity will increase the person's exercise tolerance and reduce the risk of exercise induced bronchospasms (i.e. restricted airway as a result of stress from exercise);
- If a person is physically active at a high intensity for prolonged periods of time, an asthma attack may occur (i.e. exercise induced asthma attack).

There are precautions that can be taken to avoid exercise induced asthma attacks, such as:

- Providing a proper warm-up;
- Administering medications before activity;
- Avoiding extreme environmental conditions (i.e. extreme heat or air conditioning that is too high);
- Ensuring the participant is consuming plenty of fluids (note: fluids should be at room temperature as cold drinks can trigger symptoms).

## **Teaching and Communication Technique**

People with asthma have different levels of tolerance for physical activity. It is extremely important to understand what these levels are and not push the person too hard.

- Take note of what type of medication/inhaler participants use, and where it is at all times during physical activity;

- Know the unique limits of the participant and do not push them too hard. Encourage participants to pace themselves appropriately without singling them out in front of others;
- Limit the size of the playing area if the individual is having difficulty covering large areas during play;
- Incorporate plenty of rest breaks with time to control breathing and for water consumption;
- Communicate with the participant. Get to know the warning signs. Create a signal for when participants are not feeling well and may need attention.

### **Physical Activity Tips and Modifications**

- Asthma can impact a person's capacity to exercise to varying degrees, as people have different tolerance levels to physical activity;
- Always try to know in advance how the person manages their symptoms in the event of an attack;
- Take note of what type of medication/inhaler participants use, and where it is at all times during physical activity;
- Know the unique limits of each participant. Encourage participants to pace themselves appropriately;
- Incorporate plenty of rest and hydration breaks;
- Communicate with the participant, come to understand warning signs and create a signal for when he or she is not feeling well and may need attention.

### **Resources**

The Lung Association - Asthma Home Page - <https://www.lung.ca/asthma>

Allergy/Asthma Information Association - <http://www.aaia.ca>

Lieberman, L.J. and Houston-Wilson, C. (2002). Strategies for Inclusion; A Handbook for Physical Educators. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Steadward, R.D., Wheeler, G.D., and Watkinson, E.J. (2003). Adapted Physical Activity. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta Press.

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