

Asthma & Swimming



**Asthma
Australia**

Consumer Fact Sheet

For many years people with asthma were encouraged to choose swimming over other exercise. Generations of children who had asthma were enrolled in swimming programs. This fact sheet looks at the latest evidence and advice around swimming and the relationship with asthma.

In the past, asthma medicine was less effective; children were encouraged to swim to help manage their asthma. It was noted asthma often improved or disappeared and it was often felt this was linked to swimming. Many swimming champions started swimming for their asthma, and their success added to this wonder. In fact, it was very likely that children's asthma improved as they grew and it was nothing to do with swimming.

What does research tell us now?

Research into swimming and asthma showed that swimming is safe and improves general physical fitness. However, the studies do not demonstrate a change in asthma symptoms or a reduction in asthma flare-ups.

With regular use of preventer and taking reliever medicine before exercise, people with asthma can choose any physical activity that suits them. There is no reason to choose swimming specifically. There are undoubted health benefits from regular exercise for everyone; even if there are no specific benefits for asthma.

Is swimming less likely to cause asthma symptoms related to exercise than any other activity?

Asthma symptoms associated with exercise occur due to breathing in large volume of air (usually through the mouth) which dries the airways in the lungs. Having well managed asthma means that you can choose any type of physical activity. Some studies show that humid swimming environments may be less likely to trigger asthma symptoms compared to less humid exercise environments.

Can exercise improve asthma?

Recent studies investigated whether exercise can improve and control asthma symptoms. Although regular exercise showed a significant improvement in heart and lung fitness, no specific benefits to asthma were proven.

Do elite athletes and swimmers have higher rates of asthma?

Research shows that elite athletes, particularly those training in vigorous endurance activities, such as cross country skiing (extreme cold air), swimming and running are more likely to have asthma. Potentially, intense prolonged training for swimming and other activities is associated with the development of asthma. This sort of training does not apply to the majority of people undertaking swimming as an exercise.

Can pool chemicals make people's asthma worse?

Studies of indoor swimming pool workers, who spend a significant number of hours per day in enclosed pool environments, show an increase in upper airway symptoms (nasal discharge, sneezing) but little in the way of asthma symptoms. These symptoms may be related to chlorine or disinfection products.

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Is this exposure to chemicals in indoor pools associated with asthma in young children?

Although chlorine may be unpleasant when attending indoor swimming pools, there is little evidence to indicate early childhood swimming is linked to later development of asthma.

In summary

We know swimming is safe for children and adults (with or without asthma). Physical exercise is important for everyone, throughout life. Swimming is good for fitness. If you have asthma and enjoy swimming, speak to your doctor about managing your symptoms. This advice is the same for any physical activity. There is no evidence swimming will improve asthma. Elite swimmers have higher rates of asthma compared to other athletes. Fortunately the symptoms tend to settle after training stops. Further research is needed in this area. However, the rate of asthma doesn't seem to limit success!

For more information call
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