

Asthma and the Student Athlete

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Parents, if your student athlete has asthma, take steps to be sure that his or her coach is aware of the condition ... knows what to watch for ... and is clear on what to do in an emergency, if one arises.

While asthma is more common than ever and many coaches are well-versed in the signs, symptoms and basic management, a recent study found that many more are not – only one in three kids' athletic coaches report that they felt "adequately trained" in dealing with asthma if it affected a child on their team and only half could name more than one symptom.

This information is not meant to be alarming because with today's effective medications, there is really no reason a child or teen with asthma should be unable to participate in sports – in fact asthma shouldn't interfere with a student's ability to play sports – and if it does, I'm not doing my job. The goal is for all kids to be able to do whatever sports they want – in fact, the only sport a child with asthma cannot participate in is scuba diving!"

Asthma Basics

Here are the basic facts that student-athletes, their parents and their coaches should be aware of:

Asthma is a "reversible airway obstruction," that when treated goes back to normal. "Normal" for a child means he or she is able to run around and do whatever their friends are doing without having to worry, he said, while "from the point of view of the parent, the goal is to try to manage the asthma symptoms with as few medications as possible. As for coaches, what they want "is for the child to be able to perform well and be able to compete in the game safely."

While asthma often arises in childhood (and sometimes disappears as a child grows older), the truth is that it can come on at any time in life – even adulthood. That means it is important for everyone to be aware of symptoms that could point to asthma, which include wheezing, coughing, chest tightness and difficulty breathing, especially if it occurs in the morning or at night.

Chronic asthma can be well controlled with a combination of preventive medications and rescue medications, as prescribed by a doctor.

Signs of an Asthma Attack – A Medical Emergency

An asthma attack is characterized by a shortness of breath that suddenly gets worse, accompanied by chest pain severe enough that a child has difficulty speaking more than two or three words at a time that may be accompanied by coughing spasms. It is important to recognize that this is an emergency – if a child exhibits these symptoms, it is important use rescue medications immediately and if they don't bring relief, to call 9-1-1.

Asthma & Sports

To minimize the likelihood of an asthma attack coming on during sports, kids should be vigilant about taking their preventive medications, most especially during the spring and fall when allergies are prevalent.

A good idea for all student-athletes and especially those with asthma is to warm up before beginning an intense practice or a game. It's especially important when the weather is cold, in the late fall and early

spring, since the cold can trigger an asthma attack. Kids should warm up by doing slow runs before sprinting.

If symptoms arise during play, kids should be encouraged to stop playing, use their medications and wait until their breathing returns to normal before getting back into the game.

Be alert to the fact that pollution can exacerbate asthma, so pay attention to air quality – especially important in the hot summer months. It's a good idea to schedule practices and games in the morning or early evening during the summer months, since air quality is typically worse in the midday heat.

Pediatric Asthma Program

In conjunction with my colleagues at Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, the Stamford Health Department, the American Lung Association, Stamford Hospital and primary care physicians in the area, we have launched a Pediatric Asthma Program to spread awareness of asthma and to ensure that all children with asthma receive appropriate treatment and medications. The program will include home visits to high risk families (families will be given dehumidifiers to help control symptoms and also will be educated in the dangers of passive smoking) ... instituting an emergency-room protocol to ensure that all patients with asthma are seen and treated with steroids within 10 minutes of arrival ... visits to schools with educational workshops for teachers, administrators and coaches ... and working with primary care doctors on educating patients about asthma.

For more information, contact Pediatric Pulmonology at Stamford Hospital at 203-276-5949.