



Asthma and swimming

This fact sheet is full of information, tips and advice about how you can help an individual participate in swimming and other disciplines, if living with asthma.

What is asthma?

Asthma is a common, chronic inflammatory condition affecting the lungs and airways. Approximately eight million people in the UK have asthma. When exposed to a range of stimuli (including fumes, exercise, cold air, pollen) individuals with asthma may experience wheezing, coughing, chest tightness or shortness of breath. Severe attacks of asthma are rare but can be life-threatening.

What participants need to know about asthma and swimming

- Swimming is a preferred activity for many children and adults with asthma and is associated with a range of health benefits including improved physical fitness and mental well-being.
- Traditionally swimming has been recommended for people with asthma, as the warm and humid environment is less provocative.
- Some recent studies have suggested a possible link between asthma symptoms and the use of chlorinated pools. The underlying thinking is that pool chlorine, and its by-products, may act as an airway irritant.
- Based on the current research, there is no strong evidence to suggest that recreational swimming can make well-controlled asthma worse. Indeed small studies suggest that swimming may have a beneficial effect on lung function, general fitness and asthma symptoms.

Tips for participants swimming with asthma

Do:

- use the 'nose' test. If they notice a strong chemical smell after being in the pool environment for more than three minutes, then it may suggest an imbalance in the pool chemicals or problems with pool ventilation. They should not spend long in the water and inform the pool management
- always shower prior to entering the water to help maintain good water conditions
- make sure they warm up and cool down properly to reduce the risk of exercise induced asthma
- consult their GP if swimming seems to make their asthma worse, it may be a sign that their current treatment is not optimal.

Don't:

- swim on days when their asthma symptoms are troubling, or if they have a bad cold.

Always:

- keep their 'reliever' inhaler poolside.

Consider:

- using their 'reliever' inhaler (as prescribed) 10 minutes before starting their swim.

Tips for participating in other disciplines with asthma

Open water swimming:

- **Do:** remember that the water temperature is likely to be colder, which may affect their asthma. Wearing a well-fitting wetsuit may help.
- **Always:** carry their inhaler with them if swimming far from the shore. A waterproof wallet or waist bag can be helpful.

If swimming abroad:

- **Do:** remember that different climates may affect their usual asthma control especially changes in humidity, pollen count or air quality. They may need to modify their inhaler use which if necessary should be discussed with their GP or asthma nurse before they travel.
- **Consider:** local pool hygiene standards as these may be variable.

Additional advice

Asthma UK: asthma.org.uk/