



# Asthma and competitive swimming

This fact sheet covers how you are able to swim competitively, if you are 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, which is a collection of related conditions that may result in wheezing, coughing, chest tightness or shortness of breath. A range of stimuli (including fumes, exercise, cold air, pollen) can lead to exacerbations but not all affect individuals in the same way. Severe asthma attacks are rare but can be life-threatening.

## What you need to know about asthma and competitive swimming

- Exercise induced asthma is caused by the significant increase in breathing during exercise, in particular the associated heat and water loss from the airways. The warm air environment of a swimming pool is thought to be beneficial in this respect.
- Asthma is more prevalent amongst elite athletes, who experience repeated airway stress through regular training activity.
- This is particularly seen in athletes involved in endurance events and/or exposed to certain environmental conditions. For example, competitive swimmers have longer periods of exposure to chlorine related compounds (which can act as airway irritants).
- Research suggests that upto 50 per cent of elite and highly trained swimmers may develop some form of 'airway dysfunction', even those with no previous respiratory complaints. Swimming has a higher prevalence of asthma as compared to other disciplines.
- Not all wheezing or noisy breathing after exercise is related to asthma. Other causes of airway obstruction should be considered and athletes competing at the highest levels may need to undergo specific tests to show that they definitely have asthma.
- There is no evidence to suggest that this is a barrier to competitive success and it does not negatively affect lung development.

## Tips for competitive swimming with asthma

### Do:

- use the 'nose' test. If you 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. You should not spend long in the water and inform the pool management
- consider training pools that use non-chlorine water disinfection methods and have optimal ventilation to reduce cumulative airway stress
- always keep your 'reliever' inhaler poolside
- consider using your 'reliever' inhaler (as prescribed) 10 minutes before starting your swim
- warm up and cool down to reduce the risk of exercise induced asthma
- consult your GP if swimming seems to make your asthma worse, it may be a sign that your current treatment is not optimal.

### Don't:

- train on days where your asthma signs and symptoms are troubling (reduced peak flow levels, wheeze, cough, mucus, unusual levels of breathlessness).

### Understand:

- what is normal for you. Many athletes monitor their 'peak flow' readings which might suggest if changes in treatment are needed.

### If you are competing abroad:

- **Remember:** that different climates may affect your usual asthma control especially changes in humidity, pollen count or air quality.
- **Modify:** your inhaler use.
- **Discuss:** this with your GP or asthma nurse before you travel.

## What about your medication?

- Optimal treatment is a required for competitive participation. Your GP or physician should follow the standard asthma guidelines whilst taking into account special considerations associated with sport.

- The most common asthma medications are permitted in competitive sport, but it is advisable to **check** WADA's regulations to ensure compliance, including dosages and routes of administration.
- Depending on competition level, some athletes will need to apply for a therapeutic use exemption (TUE) which permits the use of banned medications for medical reasons. See the UK anti-doping website for further information.

## Additional advice

**UK Anti-doping website:** [www.ukad.org.uk/](http://www.ukad.org.uk/)

**Anti-doping:** [www.britishswimming.org/performance/swimming/anti-doping/tues/](http://www.britishswimming.org/performance/swimming/anti-doping/tues/)

**Asthma and doping control:** [www.britishswimming.org/members-resources/athletes-and-parents/asthma-and-doping-control/](http://www.britishswimming.org/members-resources/athletes-and-parents/asthma-and-doping-control/)

**Is your medication banned in sport?** [www.globaldro.com](http://www.globaldro.com)