

MANAGING ASTHMA IN NEW MEXICO SCHOOLS

IX. THE PHYSICAL EDUCATION STAFF

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Physical Education (PE) Staff Responsibilities

Important Points

Physical education staff members have a major responsibility in working with students who have asthma and allergies and encouraging their full participation.

Students with asthma and allergies should be identified at the start of the school year.

Warm- up and cool-down activities are important for all students, especially those with asthma.

If prescribed, appropriate medications must be used before exercise.

Remember to use the school nurse as a resource to learn more about asthma and its management, especially the school's asthma emergency plan.

Members of the physical education staff have a unique responsibility in working with students who have asthma. Physical activity is important for these students and they should be encouraged to participate as fully as possible. Because asthma may be exercise induced, physical education staff should be watchful and alert. Furthermore, exercise induced asthma can occur without having a chronic asthma diagnosis.

Each school year as physical education classes begin, it is essential that teachers, coaches, trainers, and athletic directors meet with the school nurse to identify students with asthma. Like all other faculty members, PE staff members need to be knowledgeable about asthma, onset symptoms, potential triggers, and management plans. Additionally, they need to be knowledgeable about the medications used in conjunction with physical activity (especially inhalers), peak flow rates, and asthma emergency plans. Access to emergency medications is essential. These special responsibilities occur because physical activity is often where asthma symptoms first present and asthma episodes are likely to happen. Assistance of the school nurse should be sought in identifying students with asthma and in determining how to best help them manage their symptoms. There should be an awareness of exercise induced asthma (EIA).

Special responsibilities of all members of the physical education staff include:

- monitoring of warm up and cool down exercises
- encouraging good hydration for physical exercise
- knowledge and recognition of the symptoms of respiratory distress
- awareness of symptoms indicating the onset of an asthma episode
- insistence upon appropriate use of inhalers BEFORE exercise begins if prescribed
- training in the use of emergency drugs such as inhalers and Epi-Pens
- being certain that students with asthma have an assigned "buddy."

Physical education staff members need to be quick to recognize when a student is having an asthma episode. If coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath, or paleness begin, it is time for the student with asthma to cease physical activity. Medications to treat an acute asthma episode must be available to the student. Notifying the school nurse at the onset of the asthma episode is highly recommended. These episodes can be life threatening if left untreated.

PE staff members need to be especially alert for symptoms indicating an emergency and requiring **immediate medical attention**:

- **tightened neck muscles**
- **sucked in skin around the chest**
- **blue or gray lips or fingernails**
- **flared nostrils.**

Asthma symptoms need to be recognized and appropriate steps taken.

The physical education staff members need to be sensitive to the needs of students with asthma. Students should be encouraged to exercise and participate; yet their limits must be recognized and respected. This may require some modification in activities. Moderate intensity activities such as walking may need to be substituted for higher intensity activities such as running. Warm ups before and cool downs after exercise, plus good hydration are important for all students and especially important for students with asthma. Consideration should be given to temperature, wind, and high pollen counts when exercising out of doors, as these are definitely triggers for asthma. Helpful information about environmental conditions can be found at www.pollen.com.

Untreated asthma can result in death.

Physical education teachers may be the first staff members to identify students whose asthma symptoms are increasing or who have undiagnosed asthma. Extended bouts of coughing should always be noted. Coughing after physical exercise is a significant asthma indicator. Reporting symptoms of respiratory distress to the school nurse and parents is extremely important.

Should a student appear to be using asthma as an excuse to decrease participation, determine that an avoidance pattern is occurring before taking action. A student should not be encouraged to "tough it out" as this may increase stress and lead to an increase of symptoms. Managing the need for physical activity and the need for appropriate asthma care is a delicate balance and requires sensitivity and understanding. Again, the assistance of the school nurse should be sought for guidance in these difficult situations. The importance of keeping the students with asthma involved and active should not be underestimated. The physical education staff has an extremely important role in effective asthma management.

Breathing Difficulties Related to Physical Activity for Students With Asthma: Exercise-Induced Asthma

Information for Physical Educators, Coaches and Trainers

First Aid for Exercise-Induced Asthma

If, during physical activity, you notice that a student is having difficulty breathing, coughing frequently, or wheezing (noisy when breathing out), it may be asthma:

- **STOP the student's activity** and encourage the student to sit and rest.
- **Call 911** immediately if student requests or is in severe distress—struggling to breathe, lips blue, unable to walk or talk.
- Follow the designated **asthma management plan** (individual student plan, if available, or school protocol).
- Follow the school protocol to **notify the school nurse** (or other designated staff, if medication is not available or if symptoms are not resolved within 6 to 10 minutes after using the inhaler).
- **Never** let a child with breathing problems leave the gym or field alone.
- If symptoms resolve, permit students to **resume activity** when they are ready, according to their asthma management plan.
- Follow the school protocol to **inform parents** of the event and document actions taken.



This guidance sheet was developed as a partnership activity facilitated by the NAEPF, coordinated by the NHLBI of the NIH/HRHS

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STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Ways To Help Students with Asthma Participate

Identify Students with Asthma

- Ask your school nurse to identify students with asthma
- Obtain a copy of each student's asthma management plan
- Identify students who have demonstrated ability to carry and self-administer medications
- Help insure that medications are available for self-administration
- Discuss triggers, signs, and symptoms that relate to physical activity with students
- Inform parents if student frequently experiences asthma symptoms during physical activity.

Encourage Students to Prepare for Physical Activity

- Have students with prescribed medications pre-treat before exercise
- Encourage warm-up exercises
- Help students avoid their asthma triggers.

Consider Modified Exercise as Needed

- If a student has obvious breathing difficulty (wheezing, coughing) before exercising have the student treat his/her symptoms according to the asthma management plan
- Consider modifying the intensity, location, or duration of physical activity
- When environmental conditions are poor (high pollen counts, wind, freshly cut or sprayed fields, ozone alerts, or extreme cold) remember that students with asthma may need to avoid being physically active outdoors.

Date: _____

Dear Physical Education Instructor:

_____ is under my care for ASTHMA.
(Name of Student)

Because exercise is important for the asthmatic child, both physically and psychologically, I am providing information and instructions concerning this child's participation in physical education.

1. He/she should be permitted to remain in regular PE classes and should be able to engage in regular physical education activities most of the time. However, during asthma episodes (characterized by cough, wheeze, shortness of breath), activities may have to be temporarily curtailed.
2. Each asthmatic child has a different limit of tolerance to exercise. Please permit the youngster to set his/her own pace on a daily basis. In particular, asthmatics may have difficulty "running laps" and playing competitive soccer and basketball; please do not "force" the child, but let the student participate at his/her own level. Swimming is usually well tolerated and an excellent activity for asthmatics.
3. Warm-up exercises are often useful in warding off wheezing episodes.
4. We do not wish the student with asthma to feel "different." Please do what is necessary toward accomplishing this end.
5. If this student does have some problem with "endurance" sports, please permit him/her to take the following medication: _____ before participating to prevent symptoms.
6. In case of breathing difficulty, talk to the child reassuringly and calmly; have the child take prescribed medication (_____). If the treatment is ineffective or symptoms are severe, notify the school nurse or parent immediately.

We welcome your help.

*The student's parent has been given a "school medication request" form to transmit to the school. Where indicated, permit the child to medicate herself/himself if authorized by physician and parent.

Sincerely,

Physician

Parent

Signature: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Recommendations developed by
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Endorsed by the Asthma & Allergy Foundation of
America, the American Academy of Allergy &
Immunology and the American Academy of Pediatrics

Resources for Physical Education Staff

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

www.aafa.org

Power Breathing – a variety of instructional modalities for teens

Asthma and Exercise

www.schoolasthmaallergy.com

Asthma and Physical Activity in Schools: Making a Difference

from National Institute of Health

www.NIH.gov

Exercise and Asthma

from the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

www.aafa.org

Keeping Healthy at School: Making Exercise Safe from Allergy and Asthma Network - Mothers of Asthmatics

www.aanma.org

School Asthma Allergy Information Resource

www.schoolasthmaallergy.com

Includes sections just for PE teachers and coaches

See General Resources for additional information and resources available in Spanish.