Sideline Asthma Basics for Coaches

Did you know that on a team of 15 athletes, you will probably have at least one with asthma?

Be prepared to act if an athlete is having problems breathing. Know the signs. Know when they need to see their healthcare provider for more help.

Asthma First Aid

Step 1: Help athletes prevent asthma attacks. Athletes should:

- Warm up about 15-20 minutes, longer in cold weather. Cool down a minimum of 10 minutes.
- Use a scarf or mask over the mouth to warm inhaled air. Stay hydrated.
- Use a quick-relief inhaler (like albuterol) 10-15 minutes before activity.

Step 2: Help athletes during an asthma attack.

- Do not leave the athlete alone. Follow the Asthma Action Plan, if available.
- Administer quick-relief inhaler (like albuterol) as prescribed using a spacer, if available. Usual dose is 2-4 puffs.
  - Shake inhaler, exhale, release one puff, inhale, hold breath for 10 seconds, exhale and wait 1 minute. Repeat till at directed dose.
  - Inhale slowly and deeply when using a spacer. Without a spacer, hold inhaler just outside mouth and breath in quickly.
- If no inhaler is available, keep the athlete calm and encourage slow breaths. Have the athlete sit up and breath in slowly through the nose and out through pursed lips. Call 911 for help.

Step 3: Know when an athlete can return to playing.

- When symptoms are completely gone, the athlete can return to playing.
- If symptoms recur after the athlete resumes playing, repeat Step 2 above. But, the athlete should not be allowed to resume playing for the remainder of the game as his or her asthma may not be well controlled.

Athletes with mild asthma can have serious attacks after having no problems and those with no prior asthma can develop asthma during exercise. Talk to your athletes about their asthma and their asthma plan!

Asthma Symptoms

- Cough (especially with exercise and at night)
- Wheeze
- Chest pain or tightness
- Shortness of breath
- Excessive fatigue (not consistent with conditioning)

Each athlete may have different symptoms… all of the above or only one! Know your athlete’s most common symptoms!
When to call 911…

- Lips or nail beds are blue
- Difficulty talking, walking or drinking liquids
- Quick-relief medication like albuterol is not working, is unavailable or has been taken too recently to be taken again
- Nostrils flaring out
- Neck, throat or chest retractions (sucking in of the skin between the ribs or at the base of the neck as the muscles try to help pull air in)
- Athlete in obvious distress
- Change in athlete’s level of consciousness or showing signs of confusion.
- Condition is rapidly getting worse!
- Or you are not sure what to do!!!

Asthma Tools

- **Asthma Action Plan**: A document outlining an individual treatment plan for someone with asthma. Get from healthcare provider.
- **Spacer**: A small chamber used with an inhaler to slow down the medication and suspend it in the air so the athlete can inhale it deeply into the lungs.
- **Peak Flow Meter**: A small, portable hand-held device, which measures how well the lungs can expel air. Helps to detect airway narrowing.
- **Quick-relief medication**: Most common are albuterol or levalbuterol. Relaxes muscles around airways making it easier to breathe right away. Gives temporary relief – works after 5 minutes and effects last up to 4 hours. Should be given 10-15 minutes before aerobic exercise, if indicated.

Returning to Play – the 1,2,3 Approach

1 – Encourage the athlete to use an inhaler before playing, as it is important for prevention.

2 – Using an inhaler once during the same session for symptoms is okay. Symptoms must be fully resolved before playing again.

3 – But, if an inhaler is needed another time during the session due to symptoms, the athlete should be off the field for the rest of the day. It may be a sign that the athlete’s asthma may not be well controlled.

Coach’s Checklist for Asthma

- Be aware of athletes with asthma and their common symptoms.
- Make sure athletes have brought the right inhaler and the canister is full.
- Discourage sharing inhalers. Athletes with trouble breathing and no inhaler should see a healthcare provider.