What is exercise-induced asthma or bronchospasm?

Exercise can trigger asthma symptoms. Children will cough and/or wheeze, and may complain of shortness of breath, chest pain or tightness. These symptoms often occur within the first 10 minutes after starting to exercise. Symptoms or EIB or exercise induced bronchospasm can be more severe when exercising in cold, dry air.

What’s going on in the body?

During exercise in affected children, smooth muscles around the breathing tubes (bronchioles) in the lungs tighten. This causes the above symptoms.

How does a child know if she or he might have this?

Treatment for exercise-induced bronchospasm is often based on the history of getting symptoms once a child is exercising. If the child’s symptoms get better with treatment, the diagnosis is confirmed. Further tests may be ordered though are not always needed. These tests may include lung function studies before and after running on a treadmill.

What is the treatment?

Prevention is the best treatment. If a child has exercise-induced symptoms, she should warm up before and cool down after exercise. Taking 2 puffs of albuterol 10 minutes before exercise will help control symptoms. The albuterol may be repeated if needed if symptoms continue into the exercise. If 2-4 puffs of albuterol do not control symptoms, other inhalers may be prescribed including 2 puffs of Atrovent® (ipratropium) 30 minutes before exercise. A class of medicines called leukotriene antagonists (Singulair® or montelukast is one) may also be helpful.
What are the goals of treatment?

Children who have exercise symptoms and take medicine before exercising should be able to do the same physical activities as other children. These activities include gym class, playing sports, and being able to play outside of school without having breathing problems.

When a child who has exercise-induced bronchospasm catches a cold, exercise symptoms are more likely to occur and may be more severe. It is important for the child to use albuterol before exercising and also to take it easy when exercising until the cold is gone.