

Is Your Breathing Problem Really Asthma?

When an athlete starts complaining of trouble breathing during intense athletic activities, what is causing this problem? There is a condition that is gaining recognition in the athletic community that is answering this question for athletes suffering from breathing issues. Often when people think of breathing issues, they associate the issue with asthma. Research has shown that up to five percent of athletes suffer from a condition known as Vocal Cord Dysfunction-Exercised Induced Laryngeal Obstruction (VCD-EILO). VCD-EILO happens when the athlete's vocal cords block the airway causing shortness of breath and a decrease in athletic performance. Athletic activity is not the only cause for an episode of VCD-EILO; stress and anxiety are also very common triggers.¹



To understand the difference between VCD-EILO and asthma there are a few symptoms that separate the two conditions. An athlete with VCD-EILO will experience a rapid onset, tightness in the throat, struggling with inhalation (breathing in) and high pitched breathing sounds during intense physical activity with a rapid recovery once activity is stopped. In contrast, an athlete with asthma will experience a gradual onset of symptoms, tightness in the chest, struggling with exhalation (breathing out) and wheezing; the recovery for an asthmatic episode is also more gradual.¹

VCD-EILO is a very treatable condition once it is properly diagnosed and managed. If you are an athlete that has been diagnosed with asthma but your inhaler is not working, then bring up the possibility of VCD-EILO to your athletic trainer or family physician.

Reference

1. Matheny M, Pitti M.J, Getzin, A. Exercise-induced laryngeal obstruction: Recognition and management for the sports health care professional. *International Journal of Athletic Therapy and Training*, 2015;20(6): 14-18. *Human Kinetics* doi:10.1123/ijatt.2014-0111

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