

Living With Asthma!

Real life stories of people with asthma



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"Physical activities help me stay well"

Sudhan Rayan prefers to be in control of his asthma by using an asthma action plan and keeping spare inhalers with his sports and work equipment. While previously having skipped on using his inhalers, he now knows that regular inhaler usage and discipline is what really helps him.

"Yes, you can do it!"

"To those with asthma who want to start doing some exercise I would say, 'yes, you can do it! Exercise is important for our overall health and can be done even with asthma. Having control over your symptoms is important, rather than letting them control you. It's a process but knowing your limitations and being patient with yourself is key, and soon enough you'll be able to get back out there and enjoy the physical activities you like."

"I was bullied in school."

Implementation Manager, Sudhan Rayan doesn't let having asthma stop him from exercising. "I was diagnosed when I was very young. As a child, I was hospitalised for asthma all the time. During school, I was bullied for being hospitalised frequently and started to smoke to prove that I wasn't 'weak.' It was a vice that was really bad for my asthma."

Sudhan Rayan did not realise just how badly asthma could affect him until he reached the age of 30. "It started with a cold. I became very ill at the time, but I kept putting off going to the doctor because of work. Before I knew it, I wound up in the hospital due to a serious asthma attack. If only I had listened to my body initially, it might not have gotten so bad. It was a wake-up call. I managed to get back on the right track to control my asthma."

At the age of 33, my friends encouraged me to join a marathon. Exercise is one of my triggers, especially running. However, it is entirely possible to maintain good physical health. When I go running, I make sure I have my reliever with me in a pouch under my T-shirt.

SUDHAN RAYAN, 40



I had asthma as a child. I remember wheezing away, my chest going 'heee, heee', like I was blowing a whistle. It did not bother me as much as it bothered my parents, who took me to see a paediatrician. I liked going to see the doctor as he kept a bottle of Vitamin C tablet candies on his table and would offer me one if I let him examine me. The doctor told my mother that I had asthma and gave me these blue pills called Ventolin (salbutamol) to take. My mother kept this bottle on a shelf in the kitchen. I remember that whenever I had a wheeze, I would take a chair, climb up to reach the bottle and swallow a pill.

"Coping mechanisms may eventually lead to more severe asthma attacks."

Now, I am a specialist and I see children with asthma. It often brings me back to the time when I was a wheezing kid. Being a trained specialist, I have had the privilege of seeing a massive improvement in asthma action plans and treatment options since the early days.

The Global Initiative for Asthma - a guideline for the treatment of asthma - has recommended that inhaled salbutamol be prescribed together with inhaled steroids to prevent asthma attacks. It is way more effective to give them salbutamol by inhaler so that the medication reaches the lungs.

Therefore, the correct technique of using an inhaler is so important. As a doctor, I have to ensure that patients and their family members are educated on how to use their devices to control their symptoms. It is one of the key steps in asthma action plans.

Treatment for asthma has changed significantly since I was a child climbing a chair to get my Ventolin tablets. But one thing has not changed. I keep sweet vitamin C tablets on the table for the good kids who come to see me in the clinic!

Asthma is a manageable condition, and having a positive outlook, along with educating and encouraging our patients can make a huge impact!

**PROFESSOR DR
SU MAY LIEW, 48**



"The correct technique of using an inhaler is so important"

I was diagnosed with asthma in kindergarten and had to be reminded to take my inhaler regularly. As a small kid, I could not fully comprehend my diagnosis and what I had to do to take care of my health.

The acute asthma kit and inhaler helped! Whenever I had an attack, I would feel very uncomfortable. I could feel the tightness in my chest, and it felt like I was breathing through a small straw.

Typically, during an attack, my mum or dad would give me the inhaler. Trust me, it works wonders! But if the wheezing persists, they will take me to the clinic.

"I like cats, but I can't keep one"

I like cats but unfortunately can't keep one. So, I have to be sure to wash my hands after petting them if I do. Nevertheless, I did keep a pet with fur. Instead of cats, my dad bought me an adorable sugar glider. Furry, but much more manageable!

As for my diet, I have to control my seafood intake, especially prawns (which, unfortunately, is my favourite). However, I'm blessed that I can still enjoy many other kinds of food. I also cannot stand dusty surroundings, so I often clean my house with a vacuum cleaner.

There's a misconception that people with asthma can't play sports or eat ice cream. But for me, my asthma never stopped me from doing the things that I like! In fact, it teaches me how to do things moderately. Since I was 10, I have been enjoying netball and many other outdoor activities. I even added evening jogs as my routine recently! I keep my inhaler with me (which I rarely use, as my asthma control is much better these days).

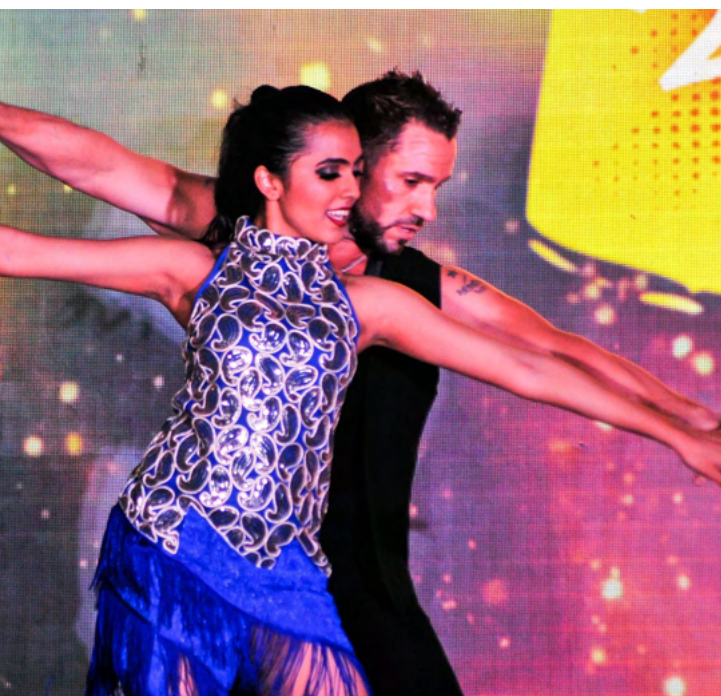
That's how I solve these challenges! We should always explore the options we have and try to appreciate what life has to offer.

**NUR AIN SYUHADA
ROHIZAN, 27**

"Understanding my asthma triggers was important to me"



"Asthma will not be a barrier"



I am Kalnish Schubert, a full-time dancer diagnosed with asthma at the age of 9. I had my first attack after having an upper respiratory tract infection. Fortunately, despite going to the Emergency Department a few times for my asthma attacks, I have never had to be hospitalised.

My triggers are infections, cold weather and animal fur which I typically try to avoid. As a full-time dancer, it is crucial for me to be healthy to perform and teach my students well. Besides, my friends and family members are all well informed about my condition and can help me in case of an attack.

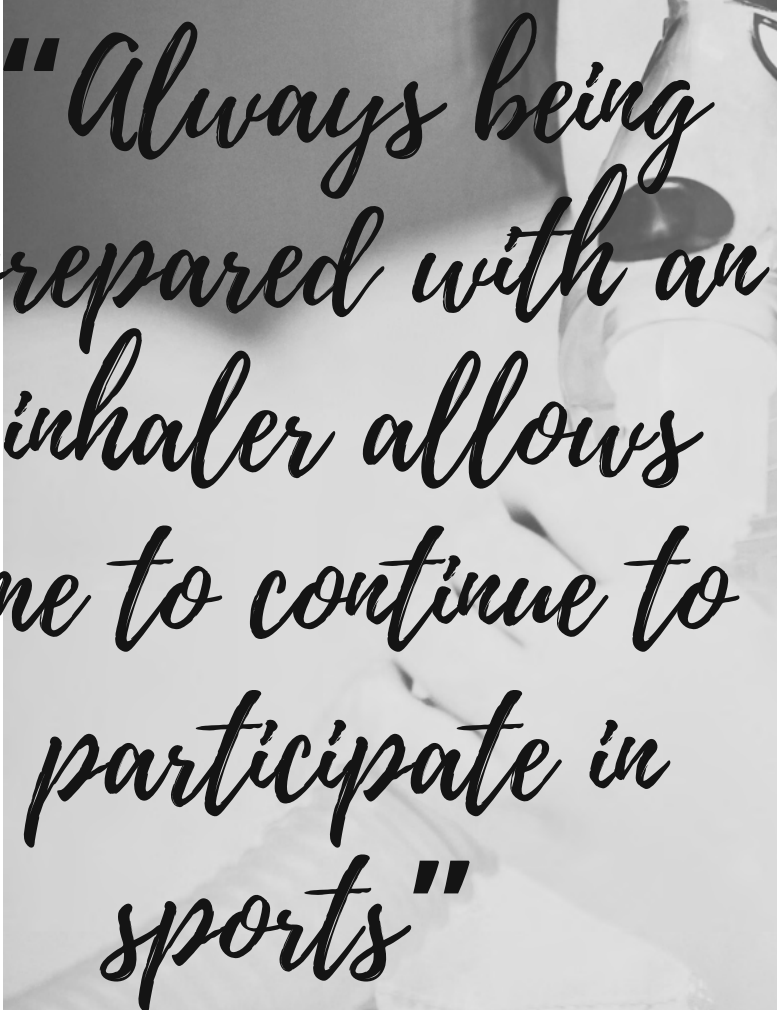
"I had to prove to myself and others that asthma will not be a barrier to achieve my dreams of becoming a dancer. "

Some of the asthma misconceptions that I have heard include asthma is a childhood disease, taking inhaled medicines is harmful to health, and that I had to avoid dancing or any form of exercise to avoid an asthma attack. The thought of giving up dance was devastating to me and that was when I decided to follow the doctor's instructions to take my medications regularly.

The challenges I faced growing up with asthma is that I had to avoid many types of food such as fruits, desserts, and iced drinks despite them not being triggers to my asthma. This is because my parents were worried that I would get an attack. As I grew up and read more about asthma, I eventually explained to them that I can eat all my favourite food and drinks moderately and that these were not my asthma triggers, although it may be the case for others.

I believe awareness regarding this disease is important so that patients with asthma may lead a normal life. Many can avoid severe attacks by sticking to their asthma action plan and understanding what their triggers are and how to avoid them,

KALNISH SCHUBERT, 26



"Always being prepared with an inhaler allows me to continue to participate in sports"

ILIA JAUHARIS, 24

I was 5 years old, when after a few episodes of noisy breathing due to cold weather and dust exposure, I was diagnosed with childhood asthma.

When I encounter my triggers or feel the symptoms of an asthma attack coming, I know that I have to continue monitoring and take quick action by taking my reliever medication.

My main trigger is cat dander, which has been challenging to avoid as all my family members have cats living in the house. Even if I'm not in direct

contact with the cats, being near any surface that they have been on or even being around them in general can trigger an attack for me. I've had to go out of my way to ensure that I keep myself away from cats which is unfortunate, as I really love cats.

When I was initially diagnosed with childhood asthma my parents and I were worried that I wouldn't be able to be as physically active as I was previously. I was involved in many different sports and activities and was worried that my asthma would limit

my ability to enjoy this passion of mine. Thankfully, I have never had issues with exercise-induced asthma. I continued playing my sports, but I was always prepared with my salbutamol inhaler, and ensured it was always easily accessible in case of any attacks.

I believe knowing your triggers and limits, having a plan, and being prepared helps to manage your symptoms and avoid attacks. It is totally possible to continue to enjoy physical activities despite having asthma.

"I followed an Asthma Action Plan, which was effective"

My childhood consisted of frequent upper respiratory tract infections which caused recurrent symptoms such as severe coughing and chest tightness. The doctor told my parents it was due to asthma and started me on inhalers. Eventually, my treatment tapered down to solely relievers, which is what I use now.

As a child, I followed an Asthma Action Plan, which was effective. Now, I don't have a plan as my asthma is well controlled, so I just take my reliever as and when I need it.

However, until starting medical school, I never even knew what an asthma action plan was. I realised that this was fairly common with all the asthma patients I've encountered during medical school – all of them knew that they have a plan to stick to for their asthma management but never knew what an asthma action plan was. Perhaps this is something we can improve on as doctors.

A challenge I had to overcome to optimise my asthma control was when I was in my teens – I initially thought that I had "outgrown" the disease but realised that was not true. I had pretty frequent bouts of

attacks when I was 16 or 17 years old and had to go back on preventer inhalers for about 6 months, which was troublesome.

"I initially thought that I had outgrown the disease."

My family and friends had a few misconceptions about asthma. A common one was that I wasn't allowed to have "cold" food when I was younger (ice-cream, milkshakes, cold drinks and even certain fruits) which kind of took some joy away as a child. In retrospect, it's a good thing now as I don't really crave foods like that in adulthood, which is good for my own blood sugar, I suppose!

I was also told by some people that I should not live abroad in countries that have cold weather because it could worsen my asthma. Conversely, some people told me that I should go live abroad because that would improve my asthma. This is just an example of the many different misconceptions about asthma and it's important that we as patients ensure that the community is educated on these matters to bring awareness.

THAM SU MING, 25



*"I believe
keeping my
symptoms under
control is good
enough to lead
a comfortable
life"*



The second I was born, the doctor wrapped me into a "baby burrito" with a cotton blanket and laid me on my mother's chest as she cradled her newborn. A while later, they realised I was not breathing properly. My tiny mouth had been gasping for air as my lungs caved in. I was then separated from my mother and sent to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) to be put in an incubator.

My oxygen levels were slowly depleting; hence, a nebuliser mask was attached to my face. As the weeks went by, the doctors saw a steady recovery and felt it was safe for me to go home. As a newborn, you'd expect to go home from the hospital with a new teddy bear or baby toys from your relatives. However, I came home with an inhaler and medicines. I had to use it every time I started wheezing.

It did annoy me in the beginning but as the years passed, I began to understand that it was a medical condition I had to suffer from for the rest of my life. "Why me?" I used to question when I was growing out of the toddler phase and beginning to understand the world around me. Come to think of it, I never answered that question. I just learned to swallow the pill and reminded myself to bring my inhaler everywhere I went. It definitely hasn't been easy, but I believe keeping my symptoms under control is good enough to lead a comfortable life.

NURIN AMINA TAN, 14

"If you want to take part in sports, go for it!"

DARRELL PAN LI REN, 12

I have always loved field events like football, jumping and running. I even qualified for the National Junior Olympic Cross-Country Championships. Unless you saw me using my inhaler, you would never guess that I have asthma. Asthma is a lung disease that can make it hard to breathe. Breathing, as you know, is important when you're running a race or charging down the soccer field. Your body needs the oxygen it gets from breathing to function normally.

I discovered that I had asthma at the age of 8 in third grade. My family suspected that I had asthma when I had a bad cough that sounded like a bark, and it just would not go away. I then had a skin prick test to identify my trigger. They also put a "sleeve" on my finger to measure the amount of oxygen in my blood.

I had that test because allergies can cause the symptoms of asthma or make asthma worse. When I first heard that I had asthma I was scared and thought I would not be able to play sports anymore. Later, I realised that I can if I had good asthma control. The hardest thing about asthma is having to remember to take my medicines and remembering my asthma triggers.

My advice to other people with asthma is that if you want to take part in sports, go for it but make sure it is fine with your doctor. Always remember to have your inhaler with you and try to avoid vigorous sports.



Having asthma is not fun at all! Why? Imagine yourself gasping for air and still not being able to catch your breath. Besides, as a person who likes sports, it is extremely difficult for me to breathe after every session of my exercise.

When I was young, around 7 to 9 years old, I already had mild asthma symptoms which required me to use a tool that the doctors gave. The tool that I use is a manual phlegm vacuum which is used to suck up all the phlegm that has accumulated within my lungs. If I didn't use it every day, the phlegm accumulates and blocks my airways.

These days, I am not required to use the tool anymore. However, whenever I'm having an allergic reaction, my airways shrink, and it becomes harder to breathe.

The most common symptom I have is becoming breathless after coming into contact with allergens.

I would always have to keep my room clean and dust-free because dust particles could cause allergies. These will lead to wheezing, difficulty in breathing and a lot of phlegm production.

I am very grateful that I can still do vigorous sports like basketball and badminton. It is not easy to breathe after every session, but it definitely helps me to build stamina and train my lungs to work more efficiently."

LOO SHU HINN, 17



"Sports help me to build stamina and train my lungs to work more efficiently."



"I try not to let asthma prevent me from doing what I enjoy."

"Without it, I felt unsafe"

I was born with asthma. From a young age, I have never been able to play like the other children in the park or join my friends in sports. That was until I got my first inhaler.

But of course, life isn't that fair. My inhaler became my other half. Without it, I felt unsafe, worried, and anxious. I tried to prevent people from finding out about my condition, but eventually, they would always know. The one thing that made me feel insecure about myself, was the one thing everyone knew about.

If I step out of the safe zone even for a moment, the next thing I know, I'd be scrambling for my inhaler, red in the face, and gasping for breath. It felt like I was chained at the ankle. Whenever I felt free, the chain grabbed me at my foot, reminding me that I'm never free from this.

"Today, I'm a dancer"

Thankfully, over the years, my asthma has improved. I couldn't push myself too far or too hard, but it is a big step up from my childhood years. I try not to let asthma prevent me from doing what I enjoy. Today, I'm a dancer, and maybe all the practice has made me feel better, but now I know my limits, and when not to push them.

I rarely meet people who know how I feel, but my friends do try their best to be there for me whenever I have an attack. Sometimes I wish and wonder what it would feel like to be born 'normal', but even so, I have learnt to accept myself for who I am.

LEONG YONG-KANG, 16

*"I learned
to cope
with my
asthma
positively"*

SHAENA JILAYSHA PERERA, 15



One word. The one word that haunted me wherever I went. It trailed behind me, ever ready to pounce at any given moment. I remember calling it my disability. It was the one thing I wished to free myself from. Many people had called me names and watched me suffer as I lay there gasping for the slightest bit of air, calling me "the asthma girl" or "the girl who couldn't live without an inhaler." I felt like the monster in every childhood book. The one everyone hated. The one that was hideous and flawed. I had cried myself to sleep every night, replaying the harsh words said to me repeatedly. As the tears rolled down my eyes, I would make a silent wish. To be rid of this torturous disease, this plague of a thing called asthma.

The day I had felt most like a monster was the day I should have been the happiest. Asthma had stripped all the happiness in

my life and replaced it with the feeling of agony. I had won the award for the swimming championship and as I walked up to the podium proudly, I felt the familiar tightening in my chest followed by what felt like the weight of a thousand gold bars crushing my body.

The pain only got worse with every struggling breath I took. It felt as if someone was squeezing the air out of me. My whole body felt alien, but the worst part was watching my classmates' faces painted with annoyance and hearing the quiet laughter fill the room. At that very moment, I realised that I would never again let this disease dictate my life and dreams. I would use it to strive for greatness. The word that once haunted me is now my motivator and I learned to cope with my asthma positively.

"I carry an inhaler everywhere I go in the event of an asthma attack."

I remember 3 years back, before COVID-19 was a thing - I was very active in playing sports like badminton and swimming. I trained for at least 4 hours each day for badminton, and swimming would be 2 hours twice a week. My parents and coaches were always worried about me over exercising, so they would advise me to take a day off for my body to recover and avoid injuries. Regardless, I was used to the intensiveness of the training, so I carried on.

One day, I had a badminton tournament, and I was looking forward to taking home that gold medal. I ate a big breakfast, hoping that I would have enough energy for the entire day. I arrived at the arena full of confidence, as I was training very hard every single day. "Court 7, Yan versus Jeremy!", the judges said. I walked up to the court, eyes locked on my opponent, as if we were about to fight.

Halfway through the match, we were having a long rally. Both of us wanted this point as it was the final point to secure the

first match. Suddenly, I felt a pain in my chest and was breathing very hard but couldn't get enough oxygen in my body. I kneeled on the ground, palms on my chest. I fainted. I opened my eyes blearily, staring at the blank white ceiling. Looking around me, I noticed a huge oxygen tank with a tube leading up to the oxygen face mask I was wearing. I realised I was in the hospital. No one was in the room with me. A few hours passed by when a doctor came in accompanied by my parents and surprisingly, my coach. The doctor told me that I had an asthma attack, but that it was a minor one.

Asthma isn't something that everyone can overcome and fight. To protect myself, I carry an inhaler everywhere I go in the event of an asthma attack. Let us all take care of our body and keep ourselves healthy and free from any sort of illness. After all, isn't health our main priority as a human?

LIM ZHUO YAN, 17



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