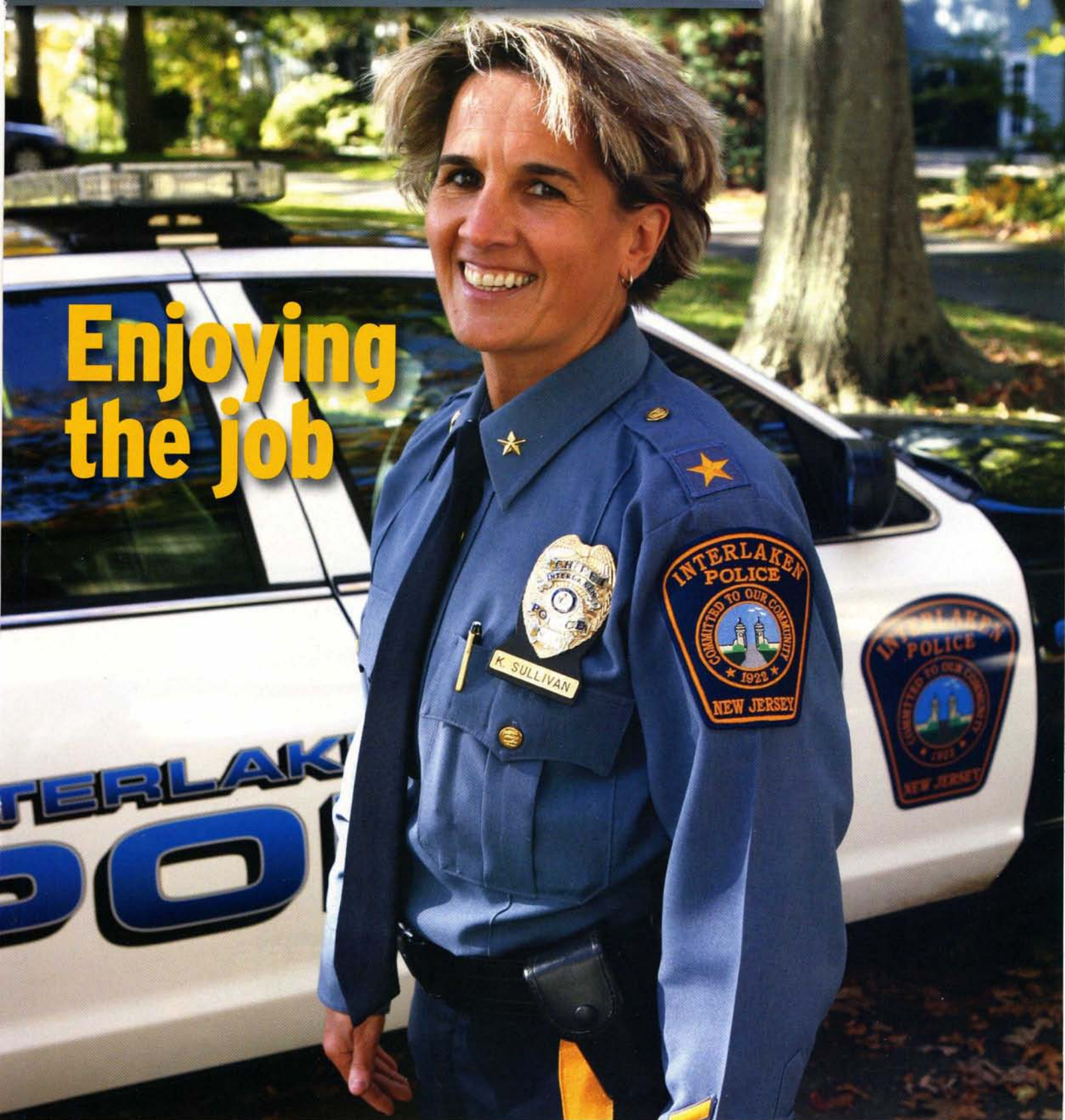


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Do you have exercise-induced asthma?

BY MATT BRZYCKI

When you run outside during the winter months, do you feel tightness in your chest? Do you cough and/or wheeze a lot?



Matt Brzycki

Maybe you're sick. Maybe you're out of shape. Or maybe you're like me and have what's called "exercise-induced asthma."

WHAT IT IS

Exercise-induced asthma (EIA) is an acute narrowing of the airway that, as the name suggests, is initiated by exercise. Classic symptoms include chest tightness, coughing, wheezing, excessive production of mucus, sore throat and shortness of breath during or after exercise.

The condition is much more prevalent than you might think. It's estimated that 12 – 15 percent of Americans have EIA. Interestingly, the condition is found in many athletes, recreational as well as elite. One study showed that 17 percent of the athletes in the 1998 Winter Olympics had EIA (with cross-country skiing as high as 50 percent). An estimated 70 – 90 percent of all individuals with chronic asthma experience EIA.

Researchers at the Naval Medical Center in San Diego have advanced an interesting theory about EIA. In their study of male and female U. S. Navy and Marine personnel (aged 18-32), they found that EIA was associated with sweating less. The researchers suggested that individuals who sweat less may have a "dry mouth." Having a dry mouth means having a dry airway which could contribute to EIA.

ACTIVITY MODIFICATIONS

The symptoms are more likely – and more severe – during efforts that are intense or prolonged. So, those who suffer from EIA should adjust the level of their intensity and the duration of their effort accordingly.

Cold, dry air can exacerbate the symptoms. An effective tactic here is for individuals to cover their nose and mouth when exercising outdoors in cold weather. Warm, humid air lessens the degree to which the airways are narrowed which suggests that swimming is an excellent activity. EIA can also be triggered by pollutants and allergens (such as dust and pollen).

Warming up prior to doing an activity seems to reduce the symptoms of EIA. This is especially true before an intense workout.

DIETARY MODIFICATIONS

Various studies have shown that making a few dietary modifications can lessen the severity of EIA. One tactic that shows promise is to decrease the intake of sodium. Research has found that this can improve EIA in as little as one or two

weeks. A good goal is to lower the intake of sodium to about 1,500 milligrams per day. One thing that can be done to reduce sodium intake is to eat less processed foods and fast foods. It's also important to read food labels and purchase low-sodium products. Keep in mind, too, that there's really little need to add salt to food once it's on the table. Besides the potential for helping with EIA, reducing the intake of sodium has a side benefit in that it can lower blood pressure.

Another dietary tactic that may improve EIA involves essential fatty acids (EFAs). There are two types of EFAs: omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids. Most Americans get too much omega-6 fats and too few omega-3 fats. Studies have found that omega-3 fats can help with EIA by reducing the narrowing of the airway. The best sources of omega-3 fats are green leafy vegetables and fish such as cod, flounder, halibut, pollock, salmon, sardines, scallops, swordfish and trout. Other sources include walnuts, flaxseeds, flax oil and eggs that are fortified with omega-3 fats.

MEDICATIONS

Anyone who suffers from EIA – or suspects EIA – should consult a physician. EIA can be alleviated with medication, often administered with an inhaler. One of the most widely prescribed medications is albuterol. Usually, the recommended dosage for adults is two puffs administered about 15 minutes prior to an activity. These medications should only be used as needed since over-reliance can decrease their effectiveness. (By the way, research has shown that the medications don't improve athletic performance.)

Note: If you're already using an inhaler, be advised that a new law will go into effect on Jan. 1, 2009. Besides being more expensive, the new inhalers – which are environmentally friendly – must be cleaned on a weekly basis. What's more, the new inhalers are primed differently, have a weaker spray and require a slower inhale.

THE BOTTOM LINE

There's no need for someone with EIA to shun physical activity. The fact of the matter is that many people, including highly successful athletes, have EIA. The severity of the symptoms can be reduced by making modifications to activities and diet. Finally, a physician may also prescribe a medication to help manage the condition. ♥

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