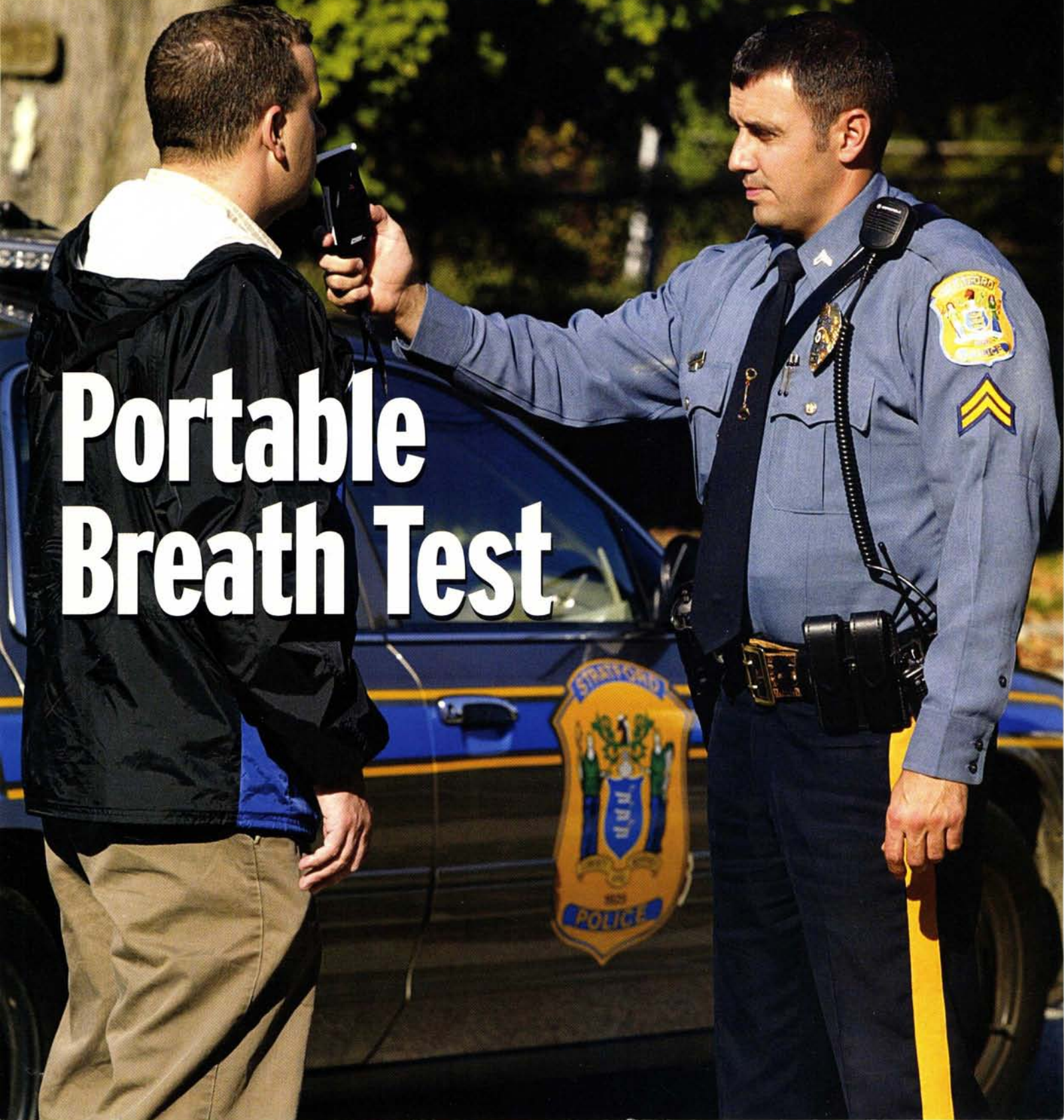


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Portable Breath Test



Preventing a stitch in the side

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

Recently, I received the following e-mail from a patrol officer at a university in New Jersey. (The e-mail is paraphrased for the sake of simplicity.)

I was wondering if you could help me or have any suggestions. When I run, I develop a pain in my left side under my rib cage. My doctor says that I should stretch more before running. I've run three times a week, every other day, for the past month but haven't been able to run a full mile. And I run at a slow pace. I read your articles in New Jersey Cops every month and would like your input. Could you help me or maybe point me in the right direction for this problem?

At one time or another, many runners and other fitness enthusiasts have probably developed a similar pain. Before looking at how to address this condition, let's learn more about what it is and how it's caused.

WHAT IT IS

The technical name for this condition is "exercise-related transient abdominal pain." In the layperson's vocabulary, though, it goes by several monikers including "side cramp," "side ache" and "side stitch." But it's usually referred to as a "stitch in the side."

The cause of it is subject to some debate. In the opinion of most authorities, it's due to a restricted supply of blood to the diaphragm (the main muscle that's

used in breathing) and spasm.

The pain is localized in the abdominal area. Though temporary, a "stitch in the side" can cause extreme discomfort.

When severe, the pain is sharp; when less severe, the pain is more like a cramp, an ache or a pull. It's related to physical activity, especially those that involve repetitive movements of the torso such as running and swimming.

The condition is fairly common: One study reported that nearly 20% of runners experienced a "stitch in the side" during the previous year. The pain was often recurrent and in the same location.

The good news is that the pain often subsides quickly. A few words of advice, though: Having a pain in the side of your abdomen doesn't automatically mean that it's a "stitch in the side." The pain could be related to an abdominal strain, for example. Or it could be even something that's far worse. To be on the safe side, then, it's important to consult with your physician (as this officer has done).

WHAT TO DO

So what if you're running and experience a "stitch in the side"? The first thing that you should do is decrease your pace or level of effort. If you're running, slow down to a jog; if you're jogging, slow down to a walk. This should help alleviate or eliminate the pain.

Another tactic is to change your breathing pattern. According to E. Randy Eichner, a medical doctor at the University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center,

you should change your "footstrike-to-breathing cadence": If the pain is on your right side and you usually exhale when your right foot hits the ground, exhale when your left foot hits; if the pain is on your left side and you usually exhale when your left foot hits the ground, exhale when your right foot hits.

Obviously, if the pain becomes unbearable, you should stop running. In this case, try to stretch your abdominal area by bending backward or to the side. (If the pain is on your right side, bend to the left; if the pain is on your left side, bend to the right.)

There are a few things that you can do as preventive measures. For one, don't eat or drink too much just prior to running. In addition, strengthening your abdominals would probably be helpful. It's also thought that as you become more fit, there's less likelihood that you'll get a "stitch in the side."

THE BOTTOM LINE

While the pain from a "stitch in the side" is transient, it can be severe and limit your performance. Implementing several preventive measures should assist you in reducing the chances that you'll experience this pain when running. ♥

Matt Brzycki is the Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. He has authored, co-authored or edited 16 books on strength and fitness, including SWAT Fitness (available at www.optac-international.com).



Matt Brzycki



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