

April is ... Managing your Child's Asthma
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Asthma is one of the most common health problems in New York State, especially among children. In fact, the number of people diagnosed with asthma grew so rapidly in the late 1990's that public health officials now call it an epidemic. The rates of adult asthma onset are also on the increase; however in this article the focus will be on asthma in children.

Asthma is one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood, and it is the fourth leading cause of disability in children under the age of 18. It causes more missed days of school than any other condition – over 12 million of them! It is also the third leading cause of hospitalization among children.

Asthma makes breathing difficult. The airways become swollen and inflamed. They react strongly to the presence of irritants such as pollen, pet dander, cigarette smoke, and dust. Exercise can also trigger an asthma attack. The specific triggers of an asthma attack differ from person to person.

The more swollen and irritated the airways are, the less air reaches the lungs. This causes coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, and a feeling of tightness in the chest. The symptoms of asthma are often worse at night and in the early morning. Because the symptoms of asthma can also be caused by other conditions, it is important to see your doctor to determine their cause. Asthma can cause permanent lung damage and even death if it is not treated properly.

Children with a family history of asthma are more likely to develop it. Those exposed to cigarette smoke or other air pollutants may develop asthma even though there is no family history of it. An asthma attack can be relatively mild or quite severe. In a severe asthma attack, the child may be breathless, have difficulty talking or have a bluish color in the lips and the finger nail beds. Severe asthma attacks are a medical emergency: you cannot wait for an appointment with your doctor. Go to the emergency room!

Asthma can be treated, but there is no cure. There are two major types of asthma medication. One kind is usually taken every day. It aims at long-term control of the asthma symptoms. They are called **maintenance** medications. Some maintenance medications are taken in the form of a pill; others are inhaled.

The other kind of medication is used during an actual asthma attack. These medications are called **rescue** medications because they act quickly when an asthma attack is in progress. Rescue medications should not be needed very often. If they are needed often, it is a sign that the daily medications are not doing their job and need to be adjusted.

It is very important to take these medicines the way they are prescribed. If the medications cause side effects, ask your doctor if a different medication can be used. Always report any changes in symptoms so the medication can be adjusted.

Older children and those involved in sports need to have ready access to their medication. Since most schools require that all medications be stored in the nurse's office, the doctor may need to write an order so that the child can have their medication with them.

Because the symptoms of asthma may change rapidly, many parents and teachers find it helpful to have a written asthma plan that spells out exactly what needs to be done when symptoms occur. One example of an asthma plan can be found at:

http://www.kidshealth.org/parent/asthma_basics/monitor/action_plan_sheet.html. When physicians use a plan like this, it helps parents, school nurses, teachers and emergency health providers to know what to do based on the child's symptoms and health history.

Many asthma attacks can actually be prevented. Once an individual knows what triggers their attacks, they can avoid those triggers. Regular vacuuming with heap filters can reduce the amount of dust in the home, for example.

When asthma is under good control, children can live very normal lives, play sports and do just about everything their peers do. When parents, children, schools and doctors are all on the same page and communicating regularly, everybody wins!

Remember always...

Prevention is Power!