

# Does Your Child Have Asthma ?

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By: Jane Page

Concerned that your son's coughing may be a symptom of asthma? Worried about your daughter's shortness of breath while exercising? You certainly are not alone. Asthma, a disease that affects the small airways of the lungs, is the most common long-term disease in children, according to area health-care professionals. One in every 10 children in North Carolina has asthma. Almost 350,000 children in the state have been diagnosed with the disease.

"Asthma is a very heterogeneous disease and varies significantly from person to person," says Dr. Michael Land, pediatric asthma specialist at Duke University Medical Center. "Common symptoms can include cough, wheezing or noisy breathing, shortness of breath and tightness of the chest."

These symptoms usually are triggered by an exposure to an allergen, virus or other factor such as pollution or cold air. Symptoms can become more noticeable when the child is active. Those with asthma seem to have a longer recovery time from upper respiratory infections and are often diagnosed with pneumonia.

## Asthma triggers and treatments

Usually people with asthma have several triggers for the disease. The most common is an upper respiratory infection. Allergies also can cause problems for people with asthma, but not everyone with allergies will have asthma. Common allergens include pets, pollen and dust. Symptoms usually occur immediately after exposure.

Parents who suspect their child may have asthma should first talk with their pediatrician or family doctor, Land says. There are many other illnesses such as an upper respiratory infection with a cough or acid reflux also with a cough that can cause similar symptoms.

The treatment for asthma varies, depending on the child and symptoms. "Some children can use what is known as 'rescue' inhaled medicines such as Albuterol," says Dr. Scott Nash of Nash Allergy & Asthma in Raleigh. "Others may have to use daily medicine to prevent asthma attacks."

Once a child has been diagnosed with asthma, parents need to work with their doctor and school to make sure the child has the proper rescue medication available at school. The American Lung Association recommends parents prepare a written "asthma action plan" and distribute it to their child's teachers and other adults such as coaches or youth group leaders. It can detail the child's symptoms, medications, any physical activity limitations, and specific instructions in case of an asthma emergency.

"It is crucial for those in schools to understand what a child with asthma may be going through and help them," says Debbie Credle, an asthma educator with WakeMed in Raleigh. "We work with families, physicians and others to provide asthma education."

## Exercise can help asthma

Parents often worry about their child with asthma participating in outdoor activities such as sports. However, exercise can be very beneficial for many asthma patients, Land says. It can help them maintain lung function and improve overall conditioning.

In some patients, exercise may trigger their asthma. "Sometimes these patients may benefit from taking a 'rescue' medicine just before exercise to help prevent their symptoms," he says. "I typically encourage exercise in my patients with asthma as long as they can tolerate it and have their symptoms under good control."

## **Awareness and education helps asthma sufferers**

It is important for older children to take part in their asthma care, health-care professionals agree. Land encourages older children to attend asthma-oriented camps to learn more about the disease and how to control and prevent the symptoms.

Local resources are available to parents who have children with asthma. For example, the Wake County Asthma Coalition works to increase public awareness of asthma and to improve conditions related to asthma health, says Lisa Feierstein, founder of Active Healthcare, Inc. in Raleigh and a member of the coalition's leadership team.

"North Carolina ranks 11th nationally with the number of children with asthma," she says. "There is a real need here for education on the various services that are available."

"We are eager to reach as many children and families as we can in North Carolina with information about asthma," says Gabrielle Steele, manager of mission services for the American Lung Association in North Carolina. The association offers special programs for children and adults in North Carolina such as the Open Airways for Schools (OAS) for children with asthma in grades 3-6 and Asthma 101 for adults.

Other resources are available from the N.C. Department of Health and Human Services' North Carolina Asthma Program. Duke Medical Center has several asthma specialty clinics within the Department of Pediatrics that are run by faculty in the divisions of pediatric pulmonology and allergy/immunology. Similar clinics are offered throughout the Triangle.

Jane Paige is a writer and mother who lives in Cary.

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### **For More Information**

#### **American Lung Association in North Carolina**

[www.lungnc.org](http://www.lungnc.org) • 1-800-LUNG-USA

#### **N.C. Department of Health and Human Services North Carolina Asthma Program**

[www.asthma.ncdhhs.gov](http://www.asthma.ncdhhs.gov) • 919-707-5213

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**Carolina Parent March 2010**