

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO ASTHMA

What is Asthma?

Asthma is the most common chronic childhood ailment, affecting approximately ten to fourteen percent of all school age children.

It is a condition where the airways become obstructed due to a spasm of the smooth muscle around the airways, inflammation, and increased mucous production. The symptoms are reversible but can be life-threatening if not promptly and adequately treated. Each child is individual; the triggers that affect them, the severity of their symptoms, and their response to medications are all unique.

Treatment

Asthma is treated by a doctor through an individually tailored routine of medications, dietary manipulation and environmental control.

Triggers

Many things or combinations of things can cause an asthma attack. These are called triggers, and each child will have triggers that are unique to that child. Some potential triggers in a school environment are:

- viral illness, colds or "flu"
- cold air
- chalk dust
- scented markers or stickers
- sudden temperature changes
- insulation
- animals of any kind
- exercise
- dust
- perfume
- fresh paint
- mold, mildew
- carpets
- pollen

Signs to Watch For

The child may or may not be able to tell you he is having trouble with his asthma due to the severity of the symptoms, or he may not want to tell you for fear of being considered different from his peers.

Here are some signs to watch for:

ASTHMA: SOME WARNING SIGNS

- **inability to exercise**
- **hunched shoulders**
- **persistent, troublesome cough**
- **child that suddenly becomes quiet, pale and withdrawn**
- **child may or may not have wheeze or noisy breaths**
- **child may become unexplainably agitated**

SERIOUS WARNING SIGNS

- **available medication not relieving symptoms**
- **laboured breathing, noticeably having to work at each breath**
- **muscles at base of neck pulling in with each breath**
- **bluish colour around mouth, lips, nail beds or ear lobes**

The last four signs indicate serious breathing problems. The parents and the teacher should discuss a crisis plan to deal with these symptoms. If no alternate plan has been discussed, call 911. Make sure the child has used his medication.

Inform the child's parents if you are noticing symptoms or if the child requires medication more often. Ask the child to speak a full sentence. If he is unable to do this with one breath, the child is in distress.

Dealing with the Asthmatic Child

- Discuss the child's condition fully with the parents. Work with the parents to establish what level of physical activity the child can cope with, and what will work best for that particular child in the school routine.
- BELIEVE THE CHILD. Do not make the child wait for medication. The child should not be compared to another child with asthma. The child's symptoms should never be belittled.

Medications

When at all possible, the child should be allowed to keep his medications with him at his desk. If this is not possible, then they should be easily and quickly accessible. Some children with severe asthma should wear their medications in a waist pack that is carried with them at all times. An extra set of medications should be kept in a safe place in the school.

Medications may cause behaviour changes in the child such as poor attention span, tremors, irritability and lethargy. If these symptoms are causing a disruption in the child's learning experience, then this should be discussed with the parents and a possible change in medications can be made by the doctor.

Classroom Activities

- Encourage physical activities; the level of activity the child can cope with may change daily, depending on the child's current condition.
- The child should not be pushed to go beyond his limits.
- The child should not be forced to continue an activity if he says he is beginning to have problems.
- Short bursts of activity are easier to tolerate than long endurance exercises.
- The child should not be restricted from activities without fully discussing this with the parents and the doctor.
- Inform the parents in advance if any activities involving food or animals of any kind are being planned.
- Plan alternative activities for the class or for the child if the original activity poses a significant health risk. The child should not just be excluded.
- It may be helpful to have the parents go through the classroom and identify potential triggers before school starts.
- Encourage class discussion about asthma. If the other children learn about asthma, they will more easily accept the child with asthma.

SUMMARY

- Asthma is the most common chronic childhood ailment.
- Asthma can be life-threatening if not promptly and adequately treated.
- Potential triggers and responses to those triggers are varied and unique to each child.

- Severity of symptoms and response to medication is unique to each child.
- A close working relationship with the parents is essential to an informed, well-managed, safe classroom experience.
- Believe the child. Children seldom fake an asthma attack; underlying factors may be affecting the child and his asthma. If you feel there is a problem with the child, discuss this with the parents; professional intervention may be necessary to deal with these factors.
- Do not lose sight of the fact that the child with asthma is still a child. Children with asthma may have a fragile self-esteem. Being singled out as "different" from others; being excluded from activities; and having to ask for medication in front of peers - all these are factors that contribute to the child turning his chronic, reversible condition into a disability.
- Encouragement, support and a good understanding of the problems facing children with asthma will go a long way in the positive emotional growth of these children at school. Teachers have an extremely important role in this development.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Asthma Clinic, Alberta Children's Hospital
1820 Richmond Road SW, Calgary, AB T2T 5C7
by referral only (403) 229-7328

Calgary Asthma program, Foothills Hospital, Calgary (adults)

Allergy Asthma Information Association (AAIA) -- Prairies/NWT/Nunavut office
16531 - 114 Street, Edmonton, AB T5X 3V6 (780) 456-6651
Email: prairies@aaia.ca

OR AAIA National Office,
Box 100, Toronto Ontario M9W 5K9
Phone (416) 679-9521 Fax (416) 679-9524 Toll-free: 1-800-611-7011
Email: national@aaia.ca Web site: www.aaia.ca

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