



FACT SHEET

Pennsylvania Chapter

ASTHMA

What is asthma?

Asthma is a respiratory disease that causes the lungs to be hypersensitive to different triggers. Things that trigger a child's asthma are colds, exercise, pets, pollens and cigarette smoke. When children have symptoms from asthma, they will cough and wheeze. Wheezing occurs when the muscles tighten around the tiny swollen airways and extra mucus is produced. During an asthma episode, the child has difficulty exhaling (breathing out). The child may have tightness in the chest with coughing and spitting up mucus. The attack can frighten children and they may appear tired, agitated, irritable or listless. A child may not be obviously wheezing and still be having asthma related symptoms such as coughing.

What causes asthma attacks?

Asthma attacks are caused by triggers. If a child does not have contact with these triggers, there are no asthma symptoms. The most common trigger for childhood asthma is a viral infection (the common cold). Other common triggers are:

- Allergens such as pets, dust mites, cockroaches, pollens, molds and grass.
- Sudden changes of temperature.
- Smoke from cigarettes, pipes, fireplaces or wood stoves.
- Odors from paint, aerosol sprays, cleaning materials, and perfumes.
- Strenuous exercise in cold or damp weather.

(Do **not** limit exercise unless the child is sick with asthma. A child who is physically fit has stronger lungs.)

What can parents and child care providers do?

- If children are old enough to use a peak flow meter, use it daily to detect early symptoms.
- Keep children with asthma away from triggers that are known to cause their wheezing.
- Have written asthma plan from health provider of what to do when asthma symptoms begin.
- Have medication (which is usually delivered by a nebulizer or inhaler) available when an asthma episode occurs.
- Keep the child calm, relaxed and sitting upright.
- Use communication closely with parents, especially when the child has symptoms.
- Use communication note book between parents and health providers to foster smooth transition from school to home.
- Recognize when a child needs medical reevaluation for asthma by a physician. e.g. when the child coughs at night, coughs with exercise, wakes at night, or has wheezing that is poorly controlled by the usual medications.
- From the website of the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute www.nhlbi.nih.gov, select "asthma," then "children," to obtain more information to support children with asthma. This website also has a useful checklist "How Asthma-Friendly is Your Child Care Setting?" The direct link to the checklist is http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/asthma/chc_chk.htm

When must children with asthma be excluded from a child care facility?

Most children with asthma can participate in their usual daily activities. Adults should know what triggers to avoid at home and in the classroom environment. If a child tends to cough and wheeze routinely during exercise, the staff should notify the parents. If asthma symptoms begin during exercise, a child can be asked to stop the activity, relax quietly and be given the prescribed medication. Remember - your observations and concerns are very important in providing good asthma control for these children.

Reference: Materials from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, American Lung Association, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America

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