

What *is* Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic (long-term) lung condition that causes repeated acute episodes (or "attacks") characterized by breathing problems such as:

- wheezing,
- coughing,
- chest tightness or pain,
- shortness of breath, and
- lack of energy.

These symptoms are due to inflammation and tightening of the airways in the respiratory system. Asthma attacks can be mild, moderate or life threatening.

It is not known precisely what causes asthma, but the constant state of inflammation in the airways of children with asthma makes them very sensitive to one or more environmental allergens or "triggers" that cause further inflammation. Triggers can include dust mites, secondhand smoke, mold, animal dander, or pollution, as well as cold air, exercise, respiratory infections, flu and colds.

What sets off asthma in one part of the country may not be a problem at all in another. For instance, in the Shenandoah Valley where the Frederick County (VA) school district is located, newcomers are rarely happy to learn about the Valley Syndrome. "This is a glorious place to live," says Supt. William Dean, "but there are lots of oaks and maples and pines that give off allergens. We also have the agribusinesses, especially spraying of pesticides on apple and peach trees. People who have never had allergies or asthma before often move here and get them. The valley syndrome is hard on respiratory systems."

In Houston, the hot, muggy climate leads to a recurring problem with molds, according to Mattye Glass, director of Health and Medical Services in the Houston ISD, who notes that last year's severe flooding exacerbated the situation immensely. Along the Mississippi, where East Dubuque Unit 119 school district is located, giant oaks add to a mold problem each year.

Currently there is no cure for asthma. However, asthma management with medication and avoiding exposure to known environmental triggers as much as possible allows those with asthma to lead normal, productive lives. ■

AASA and NSBA at Work

American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

With support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCD-PHP), Division of Adolescent and School Health (DASH), AASA has begun a five year project to reduce the burden of asthma among youth. This effort to help school leaders take positive action for asthma wellness includes: helping the CDC develop a national strategy; identifying school and community barriers, resources and best practices; creating a set of "Powerful Practices" and sharing these and other resources with school leaders through a variety of dissemination vehicles. For information on Powerful Practices, call 703-875-0759 or e-mail tbrown@aasa.org. And through a cooperative agreement with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), AASA is also working to help schools adopt voluntary programs that identify, monitor, and eliminate hazards to good indoor air quality (IAQ). The IAQ Tools for Schools Action Kit was developed to help school leaders assess potential problem areas within their buildings. Checklists are included for school staff to begin initial steps to a common sense approach that does not have to be costly. For more information and a free kit, call 703-875-0731, eplater@aasa.org.

National School Boards Association (NSBA)

The National School Boards (NSBA), through its School Health Programs Department, makes available information on asthma prevention and management. A "101" packet on Asthma in Schools, which contains facts about asthma, articles about best practices and policies, and references to additional sources of information, is available at no charge. In addition, more customized and comprehensive searches of the NSBA School Health Resource Database can be requested. The School Health Programs Web site provides links to other Internet-based resources relevant to schools addressing asthma. NSBA's services can be accessed on the Internet at <http://www.nsba.org/schoolhealth>, by e-mail at schoolhealth@nsba.org, by telephone at 703-838-6722, and via fax at 703-548-5516. ■