

# WORKING TOGETHER, BREATHING BETTER: ASTHMA MANAGEMENT IN THE SCHOOL SETTING



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The term asthma describes a chronic disease of the passageways that carry air to the lungs. An estimated nine million children in the United States have had asthma diagnosed at some time in their lives, according to Margot Fritts of the Virginia Department of Health's Division of Chronic Disease Prevention and Control. The airways of a person with asthma are always inflamed, even if they are feeling fine, and "asthma attacks"—coughing, wheezing, chest tightness and/or difficulty breathing—occur when irritants known as triggers cause airways to swell even further.

### GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING ASTHMA IN SCHOOLS

Asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism attributed to chronic conditions. Students in the United States miss approximately 14.5 million days of school annually due to asthma-related conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Managing asthma effectively may not only reduce the number of school days missed, but may also help a child pay attention, concentrate and think clearly in school. To provide a basic understanding of proper management for the school setting, the Virginia Department of Health collaborated with the Virginia Department of Education and the Virginia Asthma Coalition to put together *Guidelines for Managing Asthma in Virginia Schools: A Team Approach*. Below are some tips from this publication on how families can work with school personnel to help children breathe better.

Parents, students, school personnel and health care providers need to work together to develop an Asthma Care Plan to use in school. This plan should be designed to help the student manage his or her asthma. When a student is not able to manage his or her symptoms, an adult should be trained to provide assistance. The Asthma Care Plan is a detailed outline of how to manage asthma on a daily basis and describes what to do in an emergency. It includes information about the student, the student's medications, and emergency contact information. This plan is often developed with the school nurse who distributes to teachers and appropriate school staff members.

An Emergency Asthma Action Plan is an abbreviated Asthma Care Plan that includes only essential information and may be given to non-medical school staff to help them know how to respond appropriately in the event of an emergency. Non-medical staff can include bus drivers, custodial and food service staff members, physical education teachers and coaches.

The most important asthma management strategy is to avoid asthma triggers. Common triggers found in schools include cockroaches and other pests, mold, dander from animals in classrooms, chalk dust, dust mites, chemical pollutants (substances in science and art classes, air fresheners, perfume), and improperly maintained ventilation systems. Identifying potential triggers should be part of

the Asthma Care Plan so that school personnel can help decrease exposure to as many triggers as possible. In a Web site article on "Keeping Healthy at School," the Allergy and Asthma Network Mothers of Asthmatics outlines specific ways to minimize exposure at school:

- Suggest that your child not be seated near the chalkboard or assigned chores such as dusting, sweeping, or cleaning erasers.

- If you know your child is unable to participate in strenuous activity due to asthma, discuss alternate ways he or she can maintain involvement with his classmates, such as keeping score.

- Ask school administrators to inform you in advance of renovation or construction repairs, such as new carpeting, painting, removing ceiling tiles, resurfacing the parking areas, or tarring the roof. Fumes and dust from these activities can be overwhelming to even the healthiest of lungs and nasal passages; however, to a child with asthma or allergies, the irritants can trigger the inflammatory process and bring on days or weeks of compromised health.

- Discuss other triggers and precautions such as potted plants in the classroom that can harbor mold (as can gym lockers and showers); gym floors which are notorious for swirling clouds of dust (an easily eliminated source of a common asthma and allergy trigger); classroom pets should be kept in a "visiting area" outside the classroom; carpet squares used as mats for

