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Asthma and children: a guide to coping

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NSW HEALTH
DEPARTMENT

Asthma and children: a guide to coping

As in other western countries, the number of children with asthma in Australia has increased. With one in four young children and one in seven teenagers having this condition, more parents now have to cope with a child who has asthma.

Having a child diagnosed with asthma can be stressful for parents who may fear their child will never be able to lead a normal life, and may wonder how they will manage if their child has an asthma attack.

One of the keys to coping, according to Asthma NSW, an organisation offering education and support for people with asthma and their families, is to become as informed as possible about the condition and how to control it. Here's some good advice from Asthma NSW on recognising asthma symptoms, and how to cope if a child is diagnosed.

Clues that a child may have asthma. People with asthma have sensitive airways. When they're exposed to certain "triggers" like colds and flu, weather changes, exercise, cigarette smoke, dust mites or animal hair, for instance, their airways become narrow, making it hard for them to breathe. Although the best known symptom of asthma is wheezing, other signs may include a cough which is worse at night or after exercise, tightness in the chest or difficulty breathing. If a child coughs during the night, either regularly, or with a cold, you should see a doctor.

What if the doctor diagnoses asthma? Treatment is improving all the time and children with asthma can lead a normal life as long as their asthma is controlled.

Taking control of childhood asthma. Asthma can be well controlled with medication and by avoiding the triggers that provoke attacks. Medication includes preventive medication taken daily to make airways less sensitive, and reliever medication which makes breathing easier when the child has symptoms. Asthma NSW's advice is to find a doctor with a special interest in asthma - friends or local health professionals such as pharmacists or community health centre staff may know someone in your area. Ask the doctor to explain the child's condition, and provide a written action plan setting out how to manage asthma at home. This should include what medication is needed to control asthma, how to recognise signs of worsening asthma, and what to do in the event of an attack. If your child has exercise induced asthma, ask your doctor how to manage this. Don't be afraid to ask questions (it helps to write down a list of things to ask). If you have many questions to ask, book a long consultation.

Be sure your child's school is asthma-friendly. Many schools are well prepared to cope with children with asthma. But don't take this for granted. Questions to ask are: have staff been trained to manage an asthma attack? Does the school have a record of students with asthma, including details of medication needs? Is there an asthma first aid kit available with asthma medication in case of emergencies? Remember to give the school details of your child's asthma.

Remember that cigarette smoke can affect asthma. Parents who smoke should not smoke near babies and children (and not allow other smokers to do so either). Besides triggering asthma attacks in some children, cigarette smoke can also increase children's risk of developing asthma.

For more information, contact Asthma NSW on (02) 9906 3233 or 1800 645 130 (toll free).