

What to Do About Childhood Asthma



At Healthy Hoops® events, children learn how to manage asthma while playing basketball.

well-controlled, patients with asthma need not be limited in their daily activities. In fact, many Olympic athletes have asthma,” says Dr. Sakima Bajowala, medical director of Kaneland Allergy and Asthma Center in North Aurora, Illinois, and a fellow of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

The bad news is that many children are not receiving the medical care they need to prevent asthma attacks. More than half of children with asthma suffered at least one attack in 2016, the CDC reports. Each year, 1 in 6 visit an emergency room and 1 in 20 are hospitalized. Left unaddressed, the collective impacts of this crisis add up. The cost of uncontrolled asthma among children and adults over the next 20 years (2019–2038) will exceed \$963 billion, according to a 2019 study published in the *American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine*.

There’s no secret to managing asthma successfully: Environmental changes work, and proven medications do exist. So what can providers do to better control asthma among children?

ENGAGE AND EDUCATE

One simple strategy to reduce the rate of attacks in asthmatic children is to ensure that they take their prescribed medication. Most patients are prescribed two kinds of medication: one to address an attack and another to prevent it. But rates of usage for the preventive medication are alarmingly low: A 2013 study by the National Health Interview Survey found that only 55% of children with asthma use the medication. And for those who do, about 25% do not use it regularly as prescribed.

To investigate how providers can improve outcomes for children with asthma, AmeriHealth Caritas conducted a study, first published in the *Journal of Asthma* in 2018. Participants were divided into two pools: The low-risk group received general interventions such as printed education materials and automated messaging, while the high-risk group received both educational materials and personalized care management. Both groups saw significant improvements in adherence to medication as well as a significant reduction in emergency room visits and inpatient admissions.



Educating families about asthma means healthier, happier kids—and reduced costs.

The study shows that increasing communication with families whose children have asthma can improve outcomes, says its lead author, Dr. Andrea Gelzer, senior vice president of medical affairs at AmeriHealth Caritas. “You have to really get out into the communities,” she said in an interview with Pennsylvania public radio station WITF. “You will get the optimal outcome when you expend a lot more resources and engage with the individual.”

AmeriHealth Caritas is committed to educating people about asthma. Healthy Hoops®, a basketball event for children, is an opportunity for families to learn how to manage asthma and develop an action plan for preventing attacks. Since its inception in Philadelphia in 2002, the program has expanded to locations across the U.S., reaching more than 20,000 children and families.

Educating families about treatment and increasing the use of preventive asthma-controlling medication mean fewer missed days of school and trips to the hospital. It means healthier, happier children—and less money spent on managing the chronic disease.

“It’s hugely important from a quality of life perspective and also from a cost perspective,” Dr. Gelzer said. “We’re talking about millions of dollars in our plan, and that’s significant.” ■

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The chronic disease continues to disrupt the lives of too many children. But research shows that proactive engagement and education can improve outcomes.

The leading chronic disease among children in the United States is not diabetes or obesity. It is asthma. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 8.4% of children—more than 6 million people under the age of 18—suffer from the respiratory condition, which is also called reactive airway disease. Black and Latino children have asthma at disproportionately high rates and are more likely to die from it than are white children.

The good news is that environmental triggers—like pet dander and cockroaches or tobacco smoke—can be controlled to reduce the instance of asthma attacks. The same is true for exercise-induced asthma. “When

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