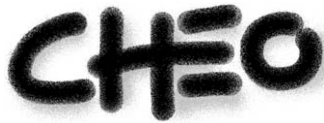


Breathing a sigh of relief!

Preventing asthma flare-ups in children



Last weekend, little Anna* woke up coughing and gasping for air. She had been battling a cold for about a week and the cough just kept getting worse. Her parents became alarmed when they noticed that she was making a wheezing sound and was struggling to breathe normally. They took her to CHEO, where she was treated for asthma, a chronic lung disease which causes the airways to become inflamed, and makes it hard to breathe normally.

Asthma is the most widespread chronic disease in children. Asthma-related hospital visits increase once children are back at school, return to being in close quarters and share everything from toys to cold viruses.

And, as Dr. Tom Kovesi – a Pediatric Respirologist at CHEO – explains, “In young children or toddlers, asthma episodes are usually triggered by colds and other viral infections, including influenza (the flu), whereas in older children, the triggers vary, and include exposure to allergens, exercise (especially in cold air) and colds and other viral infections. Cigarette smoke exposure can trigger asthma at any age.”

Before making a diagnosis of asthma, a doctor will often start by ruling out other possibilities, as they did with Anna. They listened to her lungs, asked her parents questions about any family history of asthma or allergies; they may also ask for a chest x-ray, a lung-function test (for children six years and older), a blood test, etc.

Many children with asthma can breathe normally for weeks or even months at a time between flare-ups (also referred to as asthma attacks or episodes). Most flare-ups are easily controlled with medication, and the great majority of flare-ups can be avoided altogether with a good dose of prevention.

“Prevention is the key,” said Dr. Kovesi. “For example, children with asthma should never be exposed to cigarette smoke. They should also avoid their allergy

triggers and should avoid prolonged exercise outdoors when pollution levels are high.

“And it’s particularly important for children who have been prescribed a preventative medication (also referred to as an ‘anti-inflammatory medication’ or ‘controller medication’) to use it regularly, every day, even when he or she doesn’t have asthma symptoms, during the season or seasons when the child is at risk for asthma flares,” adds Dr. Kovesi.

If your child has asthma symptoms only during colds, chances are good that she may outgrow it; however, children who have allergy-induced asthma are less likely to outgrow their asthma.

With a new asthma action plan, her medication and an awareness of her triggers, Anna has resumed her active lifestyle; she is back at school, plays soccer and is taking piano lessons. “Prevention plays a big role in reducing the number of asthma flare-ups,” adds Dr. Kovesi, “and a little goes a long way!”

To learn more about asthma, its causes and symptoms, and to print a copy of an asthma action plan, please visit CHEO’s website at the following URL:

<http://www.cheo.on.ca/english/9101.sht>

** names have been changed for privacy reasons*

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