

# ASTHMA MANAGEMENT IN SCHOOLS



**Asthma.ca**

Asthma Society of Canada  
NATIONAL ASTHMA PATIENT ALLIANCE

# GENERAL INFORMATION

Asthma is the most common chronic disease of childhood and affects people of all ages.<sup>1</sup> As many as 10 to 15% of children have asthma and it is the “number one” reason why children are admitted to hospital.<sup>2</sup> Asthma is a growing public health concern and responsible management of the disease is imperative to ensure all students with asthma remain full participants in all aspects of the school environment.

Asthma is a chronic condition where the airways that comprise the lungs become swollen and fill with mucus in response to an asthma trigger. The symptoms (coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath) are reversible but can be potentially life threatening if not promptly and adequately treated.<sup>3</sup> Students with asthma should be able to participate in all school activities if their asthma is properly managed.<sup>4</sup> The creation of asthma aware school environments are crucial to each student's success.

## KEY POINTS ON ASTHMA

- Asthma severity and management challenges are specific to the individual and can change over time.<sup>5</sup>
- Knowledge of asthma is essential in providing appropriate support to students with asthma.<sup>6</sup>
- Students with asthma may feel a stigma or embarrassment about their disease and medication and it is important to encourage an open dialogue and emotional support with teachers and classmates.<sup>7</sup>
- Avoidance and elimination of triggers can reduce asthma episodes and the need for medication.<sup>8</sup>
- Proper use of prescribed medications can help students better manage their condition.
- Asthma clinic personnel, including Certified Asthma/Respiratory Educators (CAE/CREs) and Public Health Nurses can provide information and education of asthma.
- The Asthma Society of Canada website, [www.asthma.ca](http://www.asthma.ca), provides information about asthma and how to manage it.

## GUIDING FACTS

- Asthma is a manageable condition that, if poorly controlled, can be serious and affect the student's health, well-being and ability to learn.
- All students with asthma should be encouraged to participate in all school activities to the best of their ability.
- All students with asthma should have an Asthma Action Plan, which outlines the child's asthma and what to do if symptoms occur. Schools should be aware of and follow each student's Plan.
- Schools should work to reduce or limit the environmental factors and school activities that have the potential to exacerbate a student's asthma.
- Colds and the flu are among the most common causes of asthma exacerbations. Schools should encourage proper handwashing practices and encourage personnel and students to stay home when they are feeling ill.
- Schools and staff responsible for the health and safety of students should arrange for the safe storage and immediate and ready access to each student's individual asthma medication.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The National Asthma Patient Alliance (NAPA) recommends that:

## PARENTS & GUARDIANS

1. Ensure that their children with asthma understand their condition, how to correctly use their medication, and are emotionally prepared to manage it in the school setting.
2. Complete and update an Asthma Action Plan yearly in consultation with their healthcare practitioner. Ensure all consent forms are in proper order for school staff to administer medications, where appropriate. Ensure forms are revised and updated if conditions change.
3. Meet with teachers at the beginning of each school year to review the Asthma Action Plan and asthma treatment for their child at school.
4. Ensure children with asthma have their medications (inhalers and/or spacers) on them or that their inhaler is accessible in the classroom. Parents should also provide a spare inhaler to be stored in the school's office or teacher's desk.
5. Work with school personnel to reduce or avoid triggers of asthma in the school environment.

## SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

---

1. Recognize the importance of creating a more accepting social climate for students with asthma by understanding issues related to asthma including symptoms, triggers, management and emotional issues/stigma.
2. Ensure that school asthma care policies/practices are up to date and being followed.
3. Ensure that students who have asthma are identified and that there is an Asthma Action Plan on file for each student.
4. Ensure that personnel working with children with asthma know what to do for each child.
5. Organize training/awareness sessions for school staff including, teachers, substitutes, on-site daycare staff, coaches, school bus drivers, and administration.
6. Ensure that asthma medications for each student are accessible at all times.
7. Establish a regular routine of double-checking inhaler supplies, verifying expiry dates, and ensuring the list of students with asthma is up to date.
8. Reduce exposure to triggers by encouraging a scent-free environment.
9. Notify parents when there are changes to the school environment (i.e. pesticides, chemical use, school repairs/maintenance).

## TEACHERS

---

1. Know which students have asthma and be aware of individual treatment plans, triggers, and medications.
2. Meet with parents to review each student's Asthma Action Plan and discuss ways to minimize risk and keep parents informed of changing conditions.
3. Provide asthma education for the general student body by incorporating information about asthma into classwork, as appropriate, to encourage conversation and reduce stigma.
4. Be knowledgeable of reliever medications and school's asthma emergency procedures.
5. Be aware of each child's asthma triggers and Asthma Action Plan when planning for field trips and leaving school grounds. Ensure that the medication is with the student or teacher before leaving school grounds.
6. Ensure Asthma Action Plan is accompanied by child's picture (where possible) and is readily available for substitute teachers.
7. Work to reduce and eliminate triggers within the classroom.

## STUDENTS

---

1. Know what their most up-to-date Asthma Action Plan is and follow it.
2. Avoid known triggers and alert teachers if they are experiencing exacerbations. Keep parents informed of changes in their asthma symptoms.
3. Know where their medications (inhalers) are stored in the school and how to effectively use them as prescribed when necessary.
4. Encourage open dialogue and emotional support for fellow students with asthma.
5. Participate in school activities to the best of their ability.

## CONCLUSION

The above recommendations are to assist in allowing students to maximize their potential and experience rewarding educational, social, and health benefits. During the school year, children spend about 40% of their wakeful hours at school. Recognition of asthma and the impact it has on children in school is important. Empowering students in a supportive environment helps students develop life-long skills for controlling their condition and improving their quality of life.<sup>9</sup>

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Public Health Agency of Canada (2007). *Life and breath: Respiratory disease in Canada*.
- <sup>2</sup> Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (2000). *Taking Action on Asthma: Report of the Chief Medical Officer of Health*.
- <sup>3</sup> Global Initiative for Asthma - GINA (2015). *Global Strategy for Asthma Management and Prevention*.
- <sup>4</sup> Ontario Physical and Health Education Association. *Public Health School Asthma Program (2013). Asthma in Schools: What Educators Need to Know*.
- <sup>5</sup> Global Initiative for Asthma - GINA (2015). *Causes of Asthma and Trigger Factors*.
- <sup>6</sup> National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (2014). *Managing Asthma: A Guide for Schools*.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid*.
- <sup>8</sup> The Lung Association, Ontario (2009). *All about Asthma Triggers - A Practical Guide for Health Care Providers*.
- <sup>9</sup> Halton Asthma Protocol (2015). *For Schools, Administrators and Teachers*.

