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Asthma

The Health Education Network



The Health Education Network is a Program
of the Minority Organ Donation
Education Program, Inc.

Overview

Allergic diseases, including asthma, are among the major causes of illness and disability in the United States. Illness and death from asthma have been increasing in this country for the past 15 years and are particularly high among poor, inner-city African-Americans. Although asthma is only slightly more prevalent among minority children than among whites, it accounts for three times the number of deaths. Low socioeconomic status, exposure to urban environmental contaminants, lack of access to medical care, and lack of self-management skills all contribute to the increase in deaths in minority communities.

Asthma is a growing health problem in the United States, particularly in inner-city African-American and Latino populations. Asthma is a chronic lung disease characterized by episodes of airflow obstruction. Symptoms of an asthma attack include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness

Asthma occurs in people who are predisposed to develop asthma because of genetic and environmental factors that determine susceptibility. A variety of "triggers" may start or worsen an asthma attack, including

- Exposure to allergens
- Viral respiratory infections
- Airway irritants, such as tobacco smoke and certain environmental pollutants
- Exercise

Asthma affects slightly more African Americans (5.8 percent) than Americans of European descent (5.1 percent). In 2008, however, blacks were 3 to 4 times more likely than whites to be hospitalized for asthma. In 2012, there were over 300,000 asthma-related hospitalizations in the United States. Children accounted for a large number of these. Asthma caused more than 1.5 million emergency room visits a year.

Asthma claims approximately 5,000 lives annually in the United States. Asthma deaths have increased significantly during the past two decades. Particularly alarming, the death rate from asthma for children ages 5 to 14 doubled from 2002 to 2013. African Americans were 4 to 6 times more likely than whites to die from asthma. The increasing prevalence of asthma in inner-city children underscores the need for new therapies to prevent asthma and reduce its prevalence.

Poverty, substandard housing that increases exposure to certain indoor allergens, lack of education, inadequate access to health care, and the failure to take appropriate prescribed medicines may all increase the risk of having a severe asthma attack or, more tragically, of dying from asthma.

Exposure of susceptible children to some of these triggers in early childhood, notably allergens such as house dust mites or cockroaches, may cause asthma.

Once asthma sufferers learn what conditions prompt their attacks, they can attempt to control their environments and avoid these triggers. Medical treatment with anti-inflammatory agents (especially inhaled steroids) and bronchodilators (helps the lungs), however, is usually necessary to prevent and control attacks. With good management, people usually can control their asthma. Unfortunately, those living in inner cities cannot always get the best care. Even currently available treatments do not control severe asthma in some people, such as children in inner cities.



Source: National Institute of Infectious Diseases, National Institutes of Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.