

HEALTH BARRIERS TO LEARNING: UNCONTROLLED ASTHMA

Asthma is a chronic lung disease that inflames a child's airways. When exposed to triggers and irritants, airway muscles tighten and become irritated and blocked by mucous, making it difficult to breathe.

Asthma affects about 3 students in a classroom of 30. Research has indicated that this number doubles in low-income populations.

Students with asthma are more likely to be chronically absent from school. Nighttime asthma episodes often disturb sleep, leaving students tired during the school day. As a teacher, it is important to understand when a student may be suffering from uncontrolled asthma.

Signs and Symptoms:

Symptoms and severity may differ among asthmatic students. Symptoms of asthma include:

- Coughing
- Wheezing (this is a whistling sound that may be heard while a student is breathing)
- Trouble breathing or shortness of breath while a student is playing or exercising
- Chest tightness (a student may say his/her chest hurts or does not feel good)
- Fatigue/ Tiredness
- Loud breathing

Exposure to **triggers and irritants** like dust, bugs, pets, mold, cold air, perfumes, smoke, stress and exercise, can prompt or worsen symptoms in students.

Classroom Tips:

Be alert of students who have consistent symptoms. If you think a child is suffering from uncontrolled asthma, work with the school nurse and other appropriate staff to encourage asthma management. If symptoms are extremely severe, a student should be sent to the nurse immediately.

Reduce triggers and irritants that could worsen a student's asthma in your classroom. This includes markers, perfumes, chalk dust, and paints.

If you notice a student is chronically absent or fatigued because of asthma, **engage parents** and school staff to discuss how managing asthma can improve their performance in the classroom.

Support asthma management as a **school-wide initiative**. Work with your school's administrators, staff and parents to create a healthy environment for your students and encourage student success.

Grant, R., & Brito, A. (2010). Chronic Illness and School Performance: A Literature Review Focusing on Asthma and Mental Health Conditions. *Children's Health Fund*. Retrieved July 1, 2014, from <http://www.childrenshealthfund.org/sites/default/files/chronic-illness-and-school-performance.pdf>

US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, & National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. (2003). Managing asthma: A guide for schools (NIH Publication No. 02-2650).