

MANAGING ASTHMA IN NEW MEXICO SCHOOLS

III. ASTHMA OVERVIEW

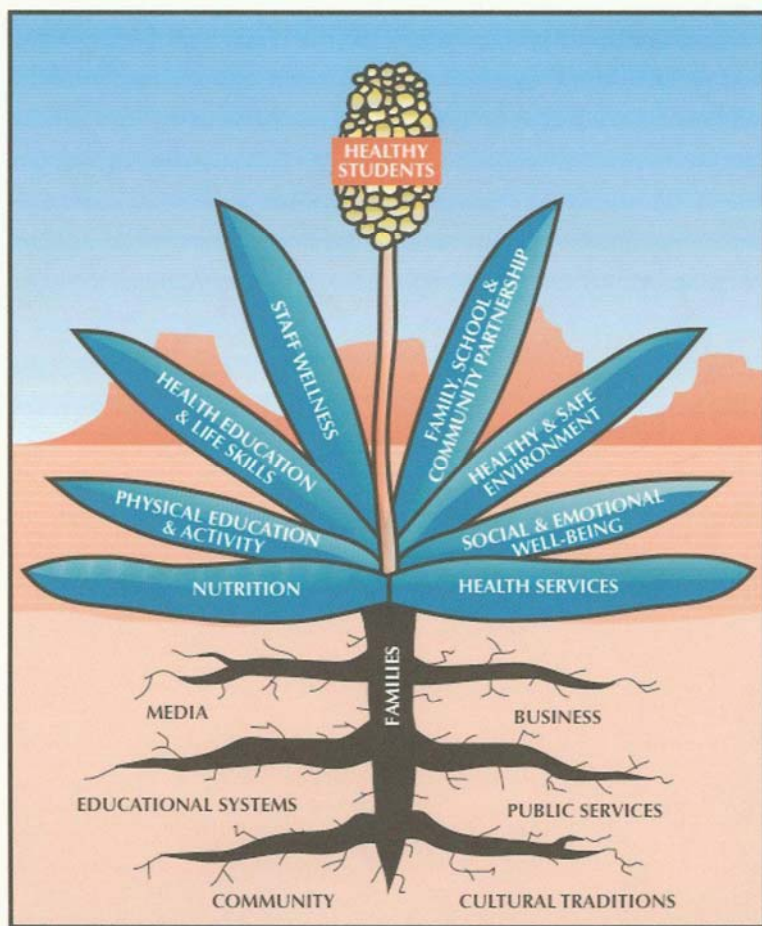


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What Is Asthma?

Important Points

Asthma can cause severe breathing problems that are potentially life threatening.

Asthma is a chronic inflammatory disorder of the airways. This means that it is a disease that affects the “tubes” that carry air in and out of the lungs. People with asthma have sensitive, hyperactive airways or “tubes” that react to any of a variety of "triggers." Cold weather, pollen, exercise, smoke, dust, animal dander, and respiratory illness are just a few of the common “triggers.” These "triggers" cause:

- inflammation or swelling in the airways
- constriction or tightening of the airway muscles
- mucous formation.

Asthma is not contagious.

When this occurs, it becomes difficult to breathe. People having an asthma episode or "attack," as it is often called, may become breathless and anxious. Signs of an asthma episode can include:

- coughing
- wheezing
- chest tightness
- shortness of breath
- paleness and perspiration.

Asthma is a significant cause of school absenteeism.

These episodes can be life threatening if left untreated. Asthma has been documented as a cause of death in school age students, including New Mexico.

Asthma cannot be cured, but it can be managed and controlled.

Fortunately, asthma is not a contagious or infectious disease. It cannot be "caught." Yet, it is one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood and it is reportedly increasing in incidence and severity. There are many theories as to why this is happening, but there is no one answer. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that approximately 22 million Americans have asthma. Of this number, approximately nine million are children. In New Mexico, more than 25,000 school age children are reported to have asthma. This means that in a classroom of 30 children two or more are likely to have asthma.

All members of the school community have a responsibility in providing a healthy school environment.

Asthma is considered to be the leading cause of missed school days due to chronic illness. This can potentially affect school performance, limit physical activity, and lead to poor self-concept. Further, there are increased doctor and hospital visits, additional medical costs, missed workdays for parents, and a general disruption in family routines.

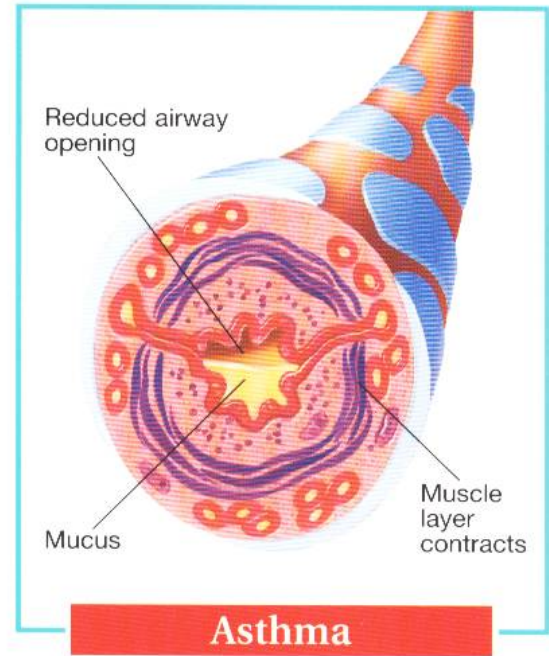
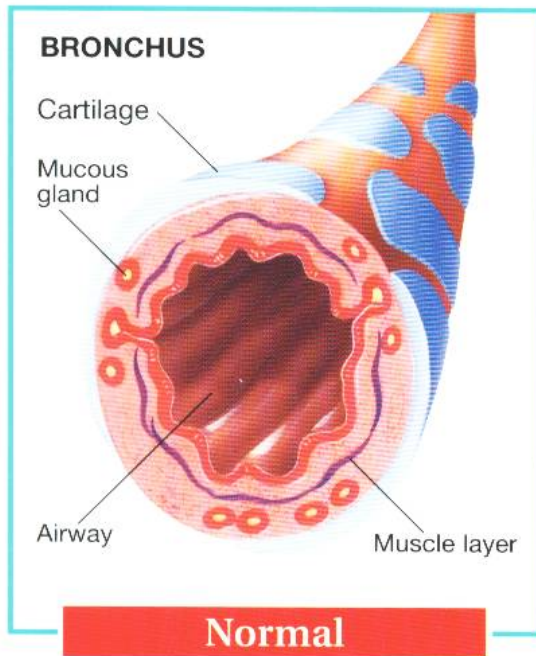
Effective asthma management in the school setting can lead to positive results such as:

- a supportive learning environment
- reduced absences
- fewer disruptions in the classroom
- appropriate emergency care
- full participation in physical activities
- cooperative family participation.

While there is no known cure for asthma, there are ways to control it. People with asthma can lead normal, productive lives with effective asthma management. Management requires a consistent, comprehensive approach and the cooperation of everyone involved. In the school setting this means the involvement of the student with asthma, the family, the medical provider, and the ENTIRE school staff. Providing an asthma friendly school environment is essential for the control and management of asthma. All members of the school community share responsibility in this effort.

Description of an Asthma Episode

While asthma episodes ("attacks") may be caused by a variety of "triggers," one trigger may be enough to start an episode. When an episode occurs the lining of the airway swells and mucous begins to form. In addition, the smooth muscles of the bronchi (windpipe) constrict (tighten). The end result is that the airways are narrowed making it more difficult for air to move into the chest. Because the airways are narrowed, there may be a whistling sound called wheezing as the person attempts to breathe. He or she may feel short of breath, have tightness in the chest, and become anxious about not being able to breathe. The person may also cough in an attempt to move the mucous out of the airways.



To understand what asthma feels like, try running in place while breathing through a straw or breathing through a straw with your nose pinched.

Signs of an Asthma Episode

Early signs of an asthma episode may include

- coughing
- chest tightness
- throat tightness
- breathing through the mouth

Later signs of an asthma episode may include

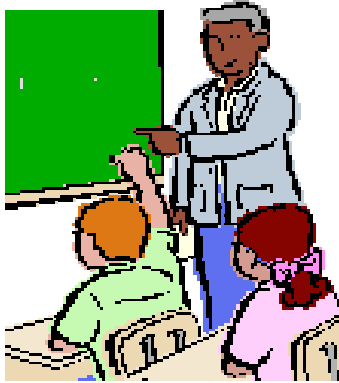
- wheezing
- shortness of breath
- rapid breathing
- paleness
- perspiration

Signs requiring immediate medical attention

- tightened neck muscles
- sucked in skin around the chest
- blue or gray lips and/or fingernails
- flared nostrils

Verbal complaints may include

- my chest is tight
- my chest hurts
- I cannot catch my breath
- my mouth is dry
- my neck feels funny
- my chin or throat itches
- I feel nauseated
- my stomach (tummy) hurts
- I feel dizzy (light headed)
- I don't feel well
- I feel tired



What Schools Need to Know About Asthma

Asthma, a lung disease, is the most common chronic illness among children.

Childhood asthma is a leading cause of school absenteeism due to a chronic illness each year. This also results in time off from work for parents.

During an asthma attack, the airways in the lungs become swollen and cause coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, and/or trouble breathing. This could happen when a student with asthma is exposed to things that may start asthma attacks such as chalk, dust, animal dander, mold, cold air, cigarette smoke, strong scents, and/or pollen.

There is no known cure for asthma, but there are ways to control it. If asthma is not controlled properly and not taken seriously, death can occur.

The incidence of childhood asthma has increased dramatically over the past two decades.

Poor and minority children are more likely to have asthma and to have higher emergency room and hospitalization rates for their asthma.

Research has demonstrated the value of asthma education in schools, showing that it helps to improve self-management of asthma, and also leads to decreased rates of absenteeism.

(Adapted from Managing Asthma in Connecticut Schools)