

## Asthma Awareness Month Podcast

Peter B: Hello, and welcome to EPA Region 2's podcast. I'm Peter Brandt and I am the Deputy Director for EPA Region 2's Public Affairs Division. Thousands across the country are suffering from runny nose, itchy watery eyes, and constant sneezing.. yes, allergy season is here and for those suffering from asthma the symptoms are much, much, worse and could even be life-threatening if not properly treated. As part of EPA's outreach during Asthma Awareness Month in May, this podcast will make you aware of specific triggers that can cause asthma in children and adults. We will also discuss common sense solutions for these triggers.

I have with me here today Larainne Koehler and Ameesha Mehta-Sampath from EPA Region 2's Radiation and Indoor Air Branch. Larainne is Health Physicist who, among other topics, works with organizations and state government officials on asthma issues in New Jersey. Ameesha is an environmental scientist who focuses on children's health and asthma issues in New York and Puerto Rico. Welcome to you both.

Larainne: We're glad to be here.

Ameesha: Thank you for the invitation.

Peter B: Larainne, can you give us an overview of the challenges we face nationally with asthma?

Larainne: Sure, Peter.

More than 20 million Americans have asthma and almost a third of that group is children. In fact, an average of one out of every 13 school-aged children has asthma in the United States. Asthma is the leading cause of missed school days among children and the most common cause of hospitalization for children aged 14 and younger.

For both adults and children - in the year 2000 alone - there were nearly 2 million emergency room visits and nearly half a million hospitalizations due to asthma, at a cost of almost \$2 billion.

Asthma prevalence is also much higher among families with lower incomes. African Americans continue to have higher rates of asthma emergency department visits, hospitalizations and deaths than do Caucasians:

- \* The rate of emergency department visits is 350 percent higher.
- \* The hospitalization rate is 240 percent higher.
- \* The asthma death rate is 200 percent higher.

Also, approximately 2 million Hispanics in the U.S. have asthma and Puerto Ricans are disproportionately impacted:

- \* The rate of asthma among Puerto Ricans is 125 percent higher than non-Hispanic white people and 80 percent higher than non-Hispanic black people.

- \* The prevalence of asthma attacks is highest among Puerto Ricans in the nation.

While the topic of asthma is widespread, public knowledge of asthma triggers and ways to manage asthma remain somewhat limited. During Asthma Awareness Month in May, and throughout the year, we here at EPA work hard to let the general public know that proper control of asthma requires personal action as well as the support of physicians and health care providers who are trained in asthma management.

Peter B: Wow...this is obviously a serious issue that affects so many people around the country, and particularly in our region.

Ameesha – can you run through some of the common triggers associated with asthma?

Ameesha: Well, there are a lot of potential triggers for asthma. I will go over some of the most common, but people can go to [www.epa.gov/asthma](http://www.epa.gov/asthma) for more in-depth information.

There are many different asthma triggers, both indoors and outdoors. Reducing exposure to triggers is a vital part of asthma control. As an example, one common trigger is mold. Molds are small, microscopic fungi that grow almost anywhere there is moisture, and they spread through spores that float through the air. There is no way to eliminate all molds indoors, but you can inhibit mold growth by limiting moisture. Clean mold off surfaces where it is growing or, in some cases, remove the affected area altogether. Open bathroom windows or turn on exhaust fans when showering, fix plumbing leaks and use a regularly cleaned dehumidifier in especially moist places such as basements.

Dust mites are also asthma triggers. Dust mites are insects so small they cannot be seen, and they feed on tiny skin particles left behind on nearly everything people touch, including: bed sheets, pillows, stuffed animals, and other items made of or covered in fabric. Visible household dust on surfaces also hold dust mites, so it is important that they are wiped clean with a damp cloth to make sure that all of the dust is removed. To keep dust mites at bay, it is recommended that carpets and furniture be vacuumed often with high efficiency filter vacuums, and that those who suffer from asthma leave the area when they are being cleaned.

Pets can trigger asthma episodes as well. Pet hair, dander, urine and saliva can cause allergic reactions and asthma episodes. The most effective way to deal with animal induced asthma is to remove the pets from the home. Because clothing and air carry all of these particles, even if you isolate the pets to a particular area they can still have adverse effects on breathing and asthma. If pets are not removed, it is very important to clean and vacuum carpets and furniture several times a week.

Droppings and body parts of pests, such as rodents and roaches, are also asthma triggers common to urban areas. Cockroaches, which are found in many crowded cities, their feces and dead bodies, are full of allergens that can aggravate symptoms. In order to help eliminate pests, make sure all trash and food waste is disposed of properly. Cracks should be filled and any place where pests can nest or hide should be cleaned and removed. Insects can be attracted to moist areas, so keep your home dry and clean.

Secondhand tobacco smoke can cause and worsen asthma episodes or attacks. Secondhand smoke is a risk factor for new asthma cases in young children. Secondhand smoke is linked to lung cancer, ear infections, and bronchitis, and may irritate the inflamed breathing passages of people with asthma. Don't smoke in your home or car, or allow others to do so.

While there is no cure for asthma, it can be controlled. Many measures can be taken to reduce the risk of attacks. **I can't stress enough that the most important step is to receive proper assistance from doctors and medical professionals who are trained in clinical asthma management, and to follow their counsel.**

But it is also important to realize that there are many triggers of the illness all around the home, and there are equally as many ways to reduce the amount of triggers and their impact for a healthier environment. Again, I encourage people to visit [www.epa.gov/asthma](http://www.epa.gov/asthma) for more information.

Peter: Thanks, Ameesha.

I am sure there are people out there who are nervous about the cost associated with treating asthma. Laraine – is it expensive to treat asthma?

Laraine: Like any medical treatment, there is always an associated cost. According to the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute, annual expenditures for health and lost productivity due to asthma are estimated at \$19.7 billion. The good news is that most insurance plans at least partially cover doctor visits and prescriptions associated with asthma.

But, as we keep repeating, the cheapest way to handle asthma is to prevent it in the first place. Ameesha went through most of the major triggers. Here are a few more things to look out for:

Play it Safe. Ozone and particle pollution can cause asthma attacks. Watch for the Air Quality Index (AQI) during your local weather report. When AQI reports unhealthy levels, limit outdoor activities. **This is a very important tip.**

Think before you spray. Instead of pesticide sprays, control pests by using baits or traps. If sprays are necessary, always circulate fresh air into the room being treated and keep asthma sufferers out of that room for several hours after any spraying.

Plan before the attack. Work with your doctor or health care provider to develop a written asthma management plan for your child that includes information on your child's triggers and how to manage them. Post this plan on your refrigerator to help control asthma triggers and reduce asthma attacks in your home. Also share it with those who spend time with your child like teachers, babysitters, and coaches.

Peter B: Ameesha – are there any regional resources people can take advantage of?

Ameesha: EPA has great regional partners in our efforts to prevent and properly treat asthma. Anyone in the country can get information at [www.epa.gov/asthma](http://www.epa.gov/asthma) but there are coalitions in our region that are also great resources. Generally speaking, asthma coalitions bring together representatives from schools, academia, health care institutions, pharmacies, community based organizations, government and others who make recommendations to improve citywide policies and systems that affect people with asthma.

People who live in New Jersey can look into the Pediatric Adult Asthma Coalition of New Jersey. They are located in Union, New Jersey, but they service the entire state. Their web site address is [www.pacnj.org](http://www.pacnj.org).

In New York, EPA works with the New York City Asthma Partnership. If you go to [www.nyc.gov](http://www.nyc.gov) and search for the New York City Asthma Partnership, their web site will pop up. [Can we list any NY state partners??].

The Asthma Coalition of Puerto Rico is another good resource. [Do we have a web site for them? Is it in Spanish and/or English?]

Peter B: There is so much information out there about asthma awareness. It is nice to know that there are so many resources available for children and adults

who have asthma. I know that I've learned a lot today about this topic and I am sure the listenership of this podcast has too.

This concludes our Asthma Awareness Month podcast. I would like to thank our participants, Larainne Koehler and Ameesha Mehta-Sampath who are both environmental experts in EPA Region 2's Radiation and Indoor Air Branch. They both spoke about asthma triggers and ways to prevent, avoid and deal with these triggers. Hopefully, with continued asthma outreach and increased knowledge of challenges and solutions, asthma rates will decrease nationwide. My name is Peter Brandt, and I hope you enjoyed our podcast. Please continue to visit us on-line at [www.epa.gov/region2](http://www.epa.gov/region2).