PREVENTION

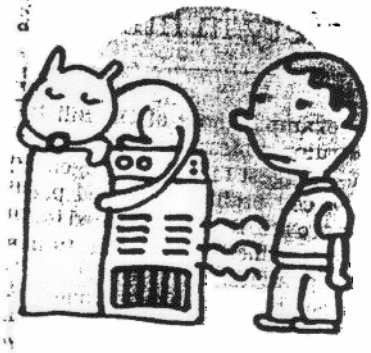
August 24 2004

Fighting the Sources of Asthma

Parents of children with asthma often try to rid their homes of the things that can set off wheezing or coughing spells: furry pets, dust mites, secondhand smoke and plant pollen. But their well-intentioned efforts are often a waste of time.

In a survey of families of nearly 900 children with asthma, researchers at the University of Michigan Mott Children's Hospital in Ann Arbor found that household allergens set off symptoms in four out of five children. Eighty-one percent of the children's parents took action to minimize the children's exposure, but 51 percent of these actions were ineffective.

Some strategies guarded children against the wrong allergens. When a child's asthma is provoked by pollen, for example, windows should be closed. Instead, some parents covered bed pillows and mattresses to control dust mites.



In other cases, parents placed filters on vacuum cleaners and ventilation systems, also to fight dust mites, when their children were not bothered by them.

"If your child's main trigger is viral infection, which is very common in children under 5, all the air filters in the world are not going to help," said Dr. Michael Cabana, associate professor of pediatrics and co-author of the study. "Hand washing and infection control are more important."

In a few cases, parents of children who were sensitive to dust mites made matters worse by using humidifiers. Dust mites thrive in humid environments.

Some parents also continued smoking indoors, or allowed others to smoke, when their children's asthma was triggered by secondhand smoke.

"Every child has different triggers," Dr. Cabana said, "and what works for one child will not work for another. I think the biggest thing we found was that health care providers need to do a better job of educating parents."

TREATMENTS

NYTimes Aug 17 04

Biofeedback vs. Asthma

People with asthma who are taught biofeedback techniques to regulate their heart rate may be able to reduce their reliance on inhaled steroids, a new study reports.

The researchers, writing in the journal Chest, cautioned that patients should not try the approach until its effect was better understood. But they said they had found a clear improvement among those patients who tried it.

The study was led by Dr. Paul M. Lehrer of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

For the study, 94 people with asthma were divided into four groups.

Over 10 weeks, one group was taught techniques for regulating heart rate and improving breathing, the second was taught biofeedback and the third got a placebo technique that appeared to involve biofeedback but did not. The fourth was asked to do nothing unusual.

The volunteers were trained at weekly sessions and asked to practice at home for 20 minutes, twice a day. They were also asked to record their asthma symptoms and measure their airflow, while the researchers kept track of their inhaler use.

All three groups that received training reported that their symptoms got better. But only in the groups taught real biofeedback techniques did researchers find improvements in lung function and reduced use of medication.