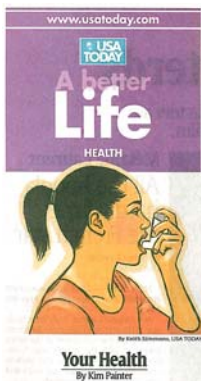


August 24, 2009



Asthma fears go to college

Dormitory environment can trigger attacks

When Nancy Sander sent her daughter to college a decade ago, she was delighted Brooke was in a non-smoking dorm where she wouldn't have to worry about smoke triggering asthma attacks.

But "non-smoking" did not really mean "non-smoking," and "Brooke ended up in the emergency room for the first time since she was 7," says Sander, founder of Allergy & Asthma Network Mothers of Asthmatics in Fairfax, Va. It was just what parents of new students with asthma fear: For a lifetime, they've monitored medications, made doctors' appointments and provided homes where the al-

lergens and irritants that can set off symptoms are kept to a minimum.

Then comes college — which can be hazardous at times for the healthiest kids. And this year, there's an added risk: outbreaks of H1N1 flu, which is expected to ignite as colleges open. People with asthma are at heightened risk for complications and death from any flu.



Allergy week

It's hay fever season. All this week, tips for taking control.

The combination of new freedoms and unhealthy conditions can be "incendiary," says Richard Gower, president of the American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology and a professor of medicine at the University of Washington, Spokane.

The good news is that colleges are becoming more asthma-friendly (non-smoking policies are more widespread and better-enforced today, Sander says). And students who arrive ready to take responsibility for their health usually do very well,

About asthma

- ▶ A chronic disease that inflames, narrows airways.
- ▶ Causes recurring wheezing, chest tightness, shortness of breath and coughing.
- ▶ Can get worse because of allergies, infections and poor air quality.
- ▶ Can be controlled with a combination of daily preventative treatments and medication to control acute symptoms.

More information: National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (www.nhlbi.nih.gov)

says James Sublett, a professor of pediatric allergy and immunology at the University of Louisville.

He says he starts preparing teens a couple of years before college. The most important thing, he says, is for them to understand that juggling meds, maintaining healthful habits and trouble-shooting hazards will be their jobs — not their parents'.

"I tell them, 'It's not your mom who's going to have a problem if you get sick, it's you.'"

Ideally, students packing their bags now have taken preventative steps — including choosing a college that provides clean, well-ventilated dorms, Sublett and other experts say.

Things students can do now:

- ▶ Leave home with a written asthma-management plan and all medications and prescriptions.
- ▶ Ask your doctor to give you the name of a specialist near campus who can help, if needed.
- ▶ Talk frankly with roommates about anything they can do to help, such as keeping windows closed on high-pollen days.
- ▶ If you are sensitive to dust mites, bring your own pillows, plus allergy-proof covers, and a mattress cover.
- ▶ Make an appointment now to get a seasonal flu shot as soon as it's available. And make sure you get the H1N1 vaccine when that is ready.
- ▶ If you develop flu symptoms — fever, cough, malaise — get medical attention immediately. Drugs that make flu less severe work best when taken within a day or two of the first symptoms.

Though such vigilance may seem daunting, it can be done, says Giselle Ruecking, 20, a musical theater major at the Chicago College of Performing Arts. Ruecking says her asthma flare-ups were once so severe "that I never thought I'd be able to go away to college." Though her school is close to her home and doctors, she has been living in a dorm for two years and just moved into her first off-campus apartment. She's an avid house-cleaner and hand-washer, gets all her vaccines, keeps a monthly doctor's appointment and, most important, she says, "I just make sure to take my medicine every day."

Have a health or medical question?

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