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## ASTHMA AND THE FLU by Gary M. Kirk, MD and MPH

The cool, crisp air of autumn marks the beginning of the influenza season. Influenza, also called "the flu", is a very contagious illness caused by a virus that affects the lungs and airways. The flu is spread when someone who is infected sneezes or coughs. The virus becomes airborne and is inhaled, or lands on surfaces, such as a desk or water fountain where others have contact, then touch their own mouth or nose to become infected.

One out of five people will get the flu, having fever, headache, muscle aches, sore throat, and a dry cough. The flu is not a common cold; it is a very serious illness. The flu causes 36,000 deaths and over 200,000 hospitalizations in the U.S. every year. While most healthy people who get the flu will feel better within a week, children, older adults, and people with asthma are at a high risk of complications that can lead to hospitalization and death.

An influenza vaccination or flu shot is the best way to prevent the flu. The 2007 national guidelines for asthma recommend that everyone who has asthma receive a flu vaccination. There are two ways to become vaccinated: the flu shot and the nasal spray. The flu shot is approved for all ages over 6 months, including those with chronic diseases such as asthma. The nasal spray has NOT been approved for people younger than 24 months and those with asthma. The flu vaccine is available starting in September, and the best time to get a flu shot is October or November. However, it is still valuable to get vaccinated in December and beyond if not obtained earlier.

The flu shot should be offered to people with asthma when they are seen by health-care providers at any time during flu season, yet often this gets missed. The Michigan Care Improvement Registry (MCIR) primarily used to track childhood immunizations, helps to improve chances for vaccination by "flagging" certain patients who need a flu shot. This system can also be used to help health care providers follow up with patients who have not yet been vaccinated.



People who have asthma who do get the flu should contact their doctors right away. There are prescription drugs available that may help ease symptoms and speed up recovery. To keep the flu from spreading to others, make sure to keep the nose and mouth covered when coughing or sneezing, and wash hands often. Avoid going to work or school until fully recovered to keep classmates and coworkers healthy.

Visit [www.flucliniclocator.org](http://www.flucliniclocator.org) and enter your zip code to find a flu clinic nearest to you.

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-  Only 21.8% of Michigan children in Medicaid with asthma received an influenza vaccination during the 2002-2003 influenza season.<sup>1</sup>
-  Among all adults in Michigan who have asthma, only 40.2% reported having received an influenza vaccination in the past 12 months in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

1. Dombkowski KJ, et al, *Archive of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*. 2006;160:966-971)

2. Michigan Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, 2004

## **ASK AN ASTHMA EDUCATOR**

**Guest AE-C: Karen Meyerson  
Asthma Network of West Michigan**

*On the news, I heard about new asthma guidelines. What exactly are these guidelines and as a patient, what should I know about them? -An Asthmatic Dad*

Great question! In August, the National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP) issued the first comprehensive update in a decade of clinical guidelines for the diagnosis and management of asthma. *The Expert Panel Report 3: Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Management of Asthma* are a set of suggestions for ideal asthma management. They take into account the most current asthma research and new medications available in order to provide the best possible care.

The clinical guidelines are generally written for doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals, but patients can benefit from knowing what the guidelines suggest. The new guidelines highlight the importance of asthma control and introduce new ways to monitor symptoms. As a patient, it's a good idea to keep a record of your daytime and nighttime symptoms and hospital and doctor visits. Remember to tell your doctor about the medications that you are taking and how often you are taking them. If it helps, write down the medications or bring them with you to your appointment. Also, tell your doctor if you aren't taking your medication as prescribed. Finally, while you are in the office, ask your doctor or asthma educator to show you how to use your inhalers.

Visit <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/asthma/asthsumm.pdf> to find the summary report of the 2007 guidelines.



Please direct questions and comments about this newsletter to:

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## **FALL ASTHMA TIP: Asthma in the Workplace**



According to a multi-national study published in *the Lancet*, certain jobs such as nursing, printing, woodworking, cleaning, and agriculture and forestry, have an increased risk of causing work related asthma. Work related asthma either makes a person's existing asthma worse or causes new asthma either from becoming allergic to a workplace substance or from exposure to a high level of an irritant chemical.

### **When to suspect your asthma is work-related:**

- \* You are an adult with new-onset asthma,
- \* Your breathing problems are worse at work,
- \* You got asthma after you started a new job,
- \* Your symptoms improve or are better when away from work,
- \* You had asthma already but it has gotten worse in your adult life.



If you are concerned, talk to your doctor. There are certain tests that can be performed to see if there is a connection between the workplace and current symptoms. The sooner you are no longer exposed to the substance at work that might be causing your asthma, the better the chance that your asthma symptoms will improve.

## **EDUCATION UPDATE: Faces of Influenza**

The American Lung Association wants you to recognize that the face of influenza could be your own. The Faces of Influenza campaign was created to help consumers see themselves, family members, and others among the many "faces" who fall among the 218 million Americans recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for annual vaccination. Visit [www.face-sofinfluenza.org](http://www.face-sofinfluenza.org) to see pictures of famous and not so famous Americans that are all affected by potential consequences of the flu.

## **MI ASTHMA CALENDAR**

### October

**20- CHEST Conference**

**25** Chicago, IL, must pre-register, for more info: [www.Chestnet.org](http://www.Chestnet.org)

**22- Asthma Information Review (AIR) Course**

**23** Bavarian Inn Lodge, Frankenmuth, \$85 for health professionals, \$45 for students, 7:45 a.m. to 5 p.m., for more info: 734-677-6772

**23 Asthma Symposium**

Hagerty Center, Traverse City, \$15 registration fee, for more info: 231-935-6930

### November

**1- Asthma Educator Preparatory Workshop**

**2** Rush University Medical Center, 1710 West Harrison Street, Chicago, for more info: [www.chicagolung.org](http://www.chicagolung.org)

**12 Asthma Information Review (AIR) Course**

KVCC, Kalamazoo, \$85 for health professionals, \$45 for students, 7:45 a.m. to 5 p.m., for more info: 734-677-6772

**27 MSRC - NAEPP Asthma Care Guidelines Updated for 2007**

Childrens Hospital of Michigan, Detroit, for more info: 734-677-6772

### December

**11 Faces of Influenza Community Awareness Event**

Westland Shopping Center, Westland, free, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. for more info: [www.alam.org](http://www.alam.org)