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Can Probiotic Supplements Prevent Asthma?

by Michael D. Cabana, MD, MPH

Although there are many useful ways to treat asthma once it has been diagnosed, there are no known ways to prevent asthma. Probiotic bacteria may be a promising and practical treatment to prevent allergic disease. Probiotics are live bacteria, usually found as supplements or in foods, such as yogurt. Since bacteria naturally live in the intestine, it is thought that probiotic supplements can help 'balance' the bacteria in the intestinal tract.



The hygiene hypothesis (a proposed idea about why some people get asthma) suggests that as people have developed a cleaner lifestyle, our bodies no longer need to fight germs as much as they did in the past and are more likely to develop allergic disease, such as asthma. A probiotic supplement may be able to tip this balance and stimulate our immune system to decrease the likelihood of developing allergic diseases.

Recent studies suggest that early exposure to a certain probiotic strain, *Lactobacillus GG* (*LGG*), is linked with lowered risk of developing allergic disease, and the effects appear to last past infancy. Based on several decades of published studies, *LGG* supplementation seems to have a steady safety record. Though the possible risks of probiotics are low, it is important to still monitor growth, nutrition and development for infants participating in these studies.

More studies are needed to repeat these findings with different types of people in different settings. Given the close link between allergic diseases, probiotics may also help prevent asthma. One such study is the Trial of Infant Probiotic Supplementation (TIPS) Study which was started at the University of Michigan and is ongoing in California. Infants enrolled in the study have: 1) at least one parent who has a history of asthma, 2) have parents that are willing to give the supplement once per day, and 3) good health. Infants will either get *LGG* daily for 6-months or a placebo (inactive) supplement. Follow-up exams will be done to find any early signs of asthma. There are likely many causes of asthma, and the study will also consider family history and the environment. If successful, probiotic supplements may also be a method to prevent asthma with large-scale public benefits.

Michael D. Cabana is Professor of Pediatrics, Epidemiology & Biostatistics Core Faculty, Institute for Health Policy Studies, Chief, Division of General Pediatrics, University of California, San Francisco (formerly of the University of Michigan)

Michigan Statistics ~ Prevalence of Asthma

Prevalence is the fraction of people in a population who have a disease at a point in time.

Children (under 18 years old)

- 232,770 children less than 18 years (9.5%) currently have asthma.*
- 11.3% of male children currently have asthma. 7.7% of female children currently have asthma.* *This is not a statistically significant difference.*
- 8.1% of non-Hispanic white children currently have asthma. 11.6% of non-Hispanic black children currently have asthma.* *This is not a statistically significant difference.*

Adults (18 years and older)

- 724,054 adults 18 years and older (9.5%) currently have asthma.*
- The asthma prevalence for adults (9.5%)* is higher than that for the United States (8.2%).**
- The asthma prevalence in Michigan is significantly higher for adult females (11%) than adult males (7.9%).*
- The asthma prevalence in Michigan is significantly higher for non-Hispanic black adults (12.9%) than non-Hispanic white adults. (8.7%).*
- Asthma prevalence for adults decreases with increasing household income. The prevalence for those earning less than \$20,000 is significantly higher than those earning \$75,000 or more.*
- Among adults reporting a disability, 15% currently have asthma. 7.9% of those not reporting a disability currently have asthma.*

Sources:

* Michigan Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, 2007 and American Community Survey, 2007.

** United States Behavioral Risk Factor Survey, 2007.



Quick Links

[AIM Website - GetAsthmaHelp.org](#)

[Michigan Asthma Statistics](#)

[6 Key Messages from the 2007 NHLBI Asthma Guidelines](#)

[Asthma Action Plans](#)

[AIM Event Calendar](#)

Ask an Asthma Educator

Guest Educator: Joni Zyber RRT, AE-C

My 9 year old daughter Jennifer starts coughing and having trouble breathing after crying or laughing hard, and it can last quite a while. Could this be asthma? ~ Debbie, Plainwell

Dear Debbie,

It certainly may be asthma. Emotions do not cause asthma. But, if Jennifer already has asthma, emotional stresses such as crying, yelling, or laughing hard can trigger asthma symptoms.

Asthma is a very serious disease, and leaving symptoms to take care of themselves may lead to permanent lung damage. Your daughter needs to be seen by a doctor about this right away to determine if she truly does have asthma. To find out, the doctor will need to ask you lots of questions, including family history of breathing problems and Jennifer's history of breathing trouble. Before the appointment, try to think about all of the times that Jennifer had trouble breathing:

- Is it always related to laughing or crying?
- Has it happened at other times, such as when she is around furry pets, cigarette smoke, or when she exercised?
- Was it worse during a particular season?
- Is she waking up at night coughing?

The doctor may also have her do some breathing tests, called spirometry, to help measure her lung function. This test is done by sitting in a chair or booth and blowing into a tube.

Based on all of this information, the doctor will classify how severe her asthma is (intermittent, mild, moderate, or severe persistent) and advise you about how to treat and prevent her asthma symptoms. You should come away from that doctor visit with a prescription for medications to treat her symptoms, and possibly another prescription for a medication to take every day to prevent symptoms. All medications and other guidance should be given to you in the form of an Asthma Action Plan, which will help you and Jennifer understand when to take medications and when to get more help. Asthma is a complex disease, be sure to ask lots of questions of the doctor so that you know what to do when she has trouble breathing.

You can find more information on asthma triggers and diagnosis at GetAsthmaHelp.org.

Michigan Asthma Calendar

June

1 Asthma 1-2-3 Facilitator Training, Great Wolf Lodge, Traverse City, 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. For more info: Patty Inman, 810.953.3951

2-3 Freedom from Smoking Facilitator Training, Great Wolf Lodge, Traverse City. For more info: Alison Nix, 517.484.7266

9 Asthma 1-2-3 Facilitator Training, ALAM Office, Lansing, 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. For more info: Alison Nix, 517.484.7266

13 American Lung Assoc. of Michigan Asthma Walk, Ah Nab Awen Park, Grand Rapids, 9 a.m. For more info: Randee Loberman, 248.784.2026 or www.asthmawalk.org

29 ~ July 1 Camp Copneconic (free day camp for kids with asthma), Flint area, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more info: Jan Roberts, 810.257.9591

July

19-25 Camp Michi-Mac (for kids with asthma), YMCA Storer Camp, Harrison Twp. For more info: Mary Hagen, 586.465.0163 or www.aafamich.org/CampMichiMac.html

27-31

Awesome Asthma Summer Day Camp (for kids in grades 2-5), St. Joseph Mercy Canton Health Center, Canton, 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more info: 734.398.7518

16 Asthma 1-2-3 Facilitator Training, Oakland Schools, Waterford, 1 to 4 p.m. For more

info: Patty Inman, 810.953.3951



Please direct questions and comments about this newsletter to the Michigan Asthma Communication Network, American Lung Association of Michigan, 403 Seymour Avenue, Lansing, Michigan 48933
Toll free in Michigan: 1.866.EZLUNGS (395.8647)

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