



Asthma is on the Rise in Marin, Nationwide

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In the United States, there has been an approximate 160 percent increase in the number of children with asthma from birth to four years of age since 1980. Among the general population, there has been a 75 percent increase. Asthma causes more than 1.5 million annual emergency room visits, and is actually the number one cause for missed school days.

Marin County alone holds the fourth highest asthma rate in California, with its rate exceeding the state average itself. Babies are increasingly born with the disease, and now the asthma count in Marin County has risen to about 250,000, according to Roslyn Layton, the Executive Director of AERC.

The statistics are alarming, but the good news is that asthma attacks can be prevented. And that is why the Asthma Education Resource Council (AERC) has stepped in. Founded in 1992, AERC is a non-profit organization that works to help people with asthma minimize their emergency room visits, and provides free asthma education as a preventative measure.

The AERC notes, however, that there are many different ways of collecting data on asthma, and that statistics can vary according to which data is used. In fact, "one of the problems with asthma is the tracking of asthma," said Coleen Le Drew, the Program Director of AERC. "Some states like California don't have a central way to track all the information.

Some researchers believe that doctors are doing a better job of diagnosing asthma, and that it accounts for some of the rise in asthma cases, but "I don't think you're going to see a 160 percent increase just because they're diagnosing it a little better," Le Drew said.

Many factors have contributed to the rise of asthma, and what some studies have revealed is that the increase of asthma parallels the increasing levels of pollution, amount of cars on the road, number of housing and buildings and basically, a rise in industrial society, according to Layton.

On the other hand, the Environmental Protection Agency attributes much of the rise to the increasing amount of time people spend indoors and indoor air pollution. The EPA estimated that people spend about 90 to 95 percent of their time indoors, while being exposed to chemicals from cleaning agents, paints, and formaldehyde in new furniture which can also trigger asthma attacks.

But even while people are outside, they are still exposed to man-made air environments.

For example, "a courtyard either has pollution from cars nearby, some air conditioning, or other manufacturing stuff nearby, so it's not even like being in the country where the air is fresh," Le Drew said.

According to Dr. Kim Mulvihill, the Medical Health reporter at KRON-TV in San Francisco, "Toxicologists here in the state of California have estimated that there'd be a dramatic reduction in the number of asthma attacks that we have every year if we can just cut down our pollution by 25 percent. So we need to clean things up."

And meanwhile, the best line of defense against asthma attacks is getting educated about it and AERC provides that service.

"Every family, with or without a person in their family with asthma, needs to learn about our environment in terms of respiratory health, so they need to be educated about how we're creating pollution in our own homes and offices, how we can minimize the bad air quality that we're breathing in, how through our driving and the kind of car that we choose to drive, are creating a lot of pollution as well," Le Drew said.

RESOURCES:

Asthma Education and Resource Council and what you can do to prevent asthma attacks:
www.asthmacouncil.org

Asthma fact sheet from the American Lung Association: www.lungusa.org/asthma/asthma.html

Environmental Protection Agency about asthma and indoor air quality:
www.epa.gov/iaq/asthma/introduction.html