

Managing the Asthma Epidemic by Dr. Bryan D. Royer
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In the United States, asthma cases have increased by more than 60 percent since the early 1980s, and asthma-related deaths have doubled to 5,000 a year. What is causing the asthma epidemic and what can we do to stem the tide? A recent series of articles in the *Journal of the American Chiropractic Association* (JACA) delves into this question and offers advice from doctors of chiropractic and allergists who have helped control asthma symptoms in many patients.

Not very long ago, it was not common to have several children in the same class that had asthma. Asthma rates in children under the age of five have increased more than 160% from 1980-1994 according to the National Institutes of Health. Overall, cases of asthma increased by 75% during this time for people of all ages and races. So far, researchers don't know why cases of asthma are increasing at such an alarming rate. They hypothesize that a combination of genetics and some non-hereditary factors — such as increased environmental exposure to potential allergens — play a role.

Decreased air quality is coupled with the allergy-friendly modern house design, says Dr. William E. Walsh, MD, FACC, an allergist practicing in Minnesota: "Fifty years ago we lived in old, drafty houses, and the breeze dried and freshened the air, and cleared out mold and other allergens. Nowadays, our super-insulated houses don't breathe adequately. Making basements into a living space increases mold exposure because mold grows in any basement."

Asthma is a chronic disease; it can't be cured—only controlled. For best treatment results, both the primary care physician and an asthma specialist, such as an allergist or pulmonologist, should be involved. The treatment program, in addition to medication intake, should include reducing exposure to the substances that induce acute episodes and identifying specific allergens that affect the patient. Food has become another source of exposure to allergens, with the preservatives used and the ease of fast food.

Allergens aren't the only culprit. Stress factors—such as moving to a new home, or changing jobs—may induce or aggravate asthma attacks. Even emotional expressions such as fear, anger, frustration, hard crying, or laughing can cause an attack as well. To reduce the patient's stress level and improve the patient's quality of life, alternative treatments should be incorporated into the treatment program. Various relaxation techniques, such as biofeedback, meditation, yoga, and stress management, as well as massage, chiropractic manipulation, breathing exercises, and acupuncture can be helpful.

A multi-site clinical trial on chiropractic management of asthma is underway in Australia. "The preliminary data are very encouraging. Chiropractic patients are showing decreases in physical asthma symptoms and cortisol levels," says Dr. Anthony Rosner, director of education and research for the Foundation of Chiropractic Education and Research.

Although asthma cannot be cured, there are several ways besides medication to control it. Doctors of chiropractic can assess the patient's physical and nutritional status. Careful evaluation of the biomechanical components of the mid-back and ribcage can reveal problems that can hinder the patient's ability to breathe. The rib joints in the front and the back should be able to move freely. The patient's posture is important as well because a slouched posture can impede breathing. Many people say that they feel they can breathe easier

Chiropractic physicians can also evaluate a patient's lifestyle, diet, and stressors. Advanced laboratory testing can also be used to determine a patient's sub-clinical allergies, which do not show up on a typical scratch test and are often overlooked. With co-treatment by a chiropractic physician, many children and adults can decrease or eliminate their medications after consulting with their medical doctors.

Asthma experts offer the following tips for asthma patients:

- Use air filters to help clean air in your home.
- Cover mattresses and pillows with dust covers and use hypoallergenic bed clothing to reduce exposure to dust mites.
- If your condition is getting worse, get checked for viral respiratory infections and different medical conditions, such as flu, rhinitis, sinusitis, and gastroesophageal reflux. When those are treated and eliminated, asthma symptoms improve. Endocrine factors, such as menstruation, pregnancy, and thyroid disease, may exacerbate asthma, as well.
- Some medications— aspirin; beta-blockers, including eye drops; nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, etc.—can also precipitate or aggravate asthma symptoms.
- If your asthma is exercise-induced, an individually prescribed exercise program carefully chosen under the guidance of your primary health care provider or doctor of chiropractic should be incorporated into the treatment plan.
- Avoid sulfites or monosodium glutamate (MSG) in foods. Since both additives are used in a wide variety of foods, carefully read processed food labels and choose MSG-free foods when eating out.
- Choose a more vegetarian-type diet. Animal proteins found in meat include arachidonic acid—a precursor for inflammation.
- Include foods with omega-3 fatty acids in the diet—such as fish or fish oil.
- Supplement with vitamin C, which helps reduce allergic reactions and wheezing symptoms.
- The addition of a doctor of chiropractic can be a valuable asset to a healthcare team and help to improve the quality of life of children and adults with asthma.

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