

# Asthma in Our Schools

## A COMPREHENSIVE REPORT

### Asthma Friendly Schools **ENSURING THE HEALTH OF STUDENTS WITH ASTHMA IN SONOMA COUNTY**

A survey of Southwest Santa Rosa families concludes that as many as 19% of students are likely to have asthma. These students are missing more school, exercising less and having more visits to the emergency department than their peers without asthma.

**Breathing**—we spend all our time doing it, yet we rarely think about it. Children with asthma think about it all the time. They have learned from experience that breathing is not something to take for granted. Asthma, a chronic disease of inflamed airways and lungs, is serious and can be life threatening. Asthma rates are higher than previously thought and continue to climb: nearly one in five Sonoma County children report having asthma<sup>1</sup>.

For local schools this 20% translates into 14,600 students. Students who experience the symptoms (wheezing, coughing and shortness of breath) of uncontrolled asthma miss more school and their academic performance suffers as well. While school nurses are vital in addressing asthma in schools, a licensed school nurse may spend as little as 5-10 hours a week at any given school. There are currently 39 school nurses attending to the needs of 73,000 students in Sonoma County's 40 school districts. Nurses need support to develop systems that coordinate asthma care with schools, families and health care providers.

Everyone working with children in a school setting should be aware of what asthma is, who has the disease, how to avoid triggers, and what to do in an emergency.

The Sonoma County Asthma Coalition is ready to assist schools in addressing the needs of students with asthma by:

- Introducing practical means to better identify students with asthma
- Sharing systematic approaches that can improve links between home, school, and medical providers
- Teaching simple ways to decrease exposure to asthma triggers
- Providing tools that help students with asthma control their symptoms
- Sharing resources that assure more participation in physical activities

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in a school setting should  
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Sonoma County  
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1. California Health Kids Survey, 2001-2003  
available at [www.californiabreathing.org](http://www.californiabreathing.org)

# Top 5 Ways to Help Students with Asthma

## 1 Finding Out Who Has Asthma A PRIORITY FOR SCHOOLS

When it comes to managing asthma in schools, the priority is to first identify who has asthma. The place to start is with the most reliable and consistent student record: the student emergency card. The Coalition, in partnership with the Sonoma County Office of Education, has updated the County emergency card, which is currently being piloted in the Roseland School District. The card now specifies asthma and medication use. By taking this first step, school nurses are better equipped to provide a more accurate list of students with asthma to the teaching and office staff each year. Distributing this list early in the year will allow teachers to discuss health concerns with parents. School nurses and staff can also assemble a more complete profile of the student's triggers, medication and treatment needs.

### ASTHMA 101: A BEST PRACTICE FOR TRAINING SCHOOL STAFF

*The American Lung Association has designed a curriculum for school staff to learn about asthma symptoms, treatments, and triggers. The importance of a management plan and what to do during an emergency should be discussed annually. Contact the Sonoma County Asthma Coalition for more information.*

## 2 Trigger Avoidance and Clean Air



Taking steps to ensure cleaner, trigger-free air for students and staff is an important component of controlling asthma in schools. Besides educating staff, there are a number of easy, low/no-cost improvements and changes that schools can make to the school environment that will benefit all children, especially those with asthma.

Simple measures that can be followed include: making sure air intake vents are not blocked, removing animals from classrooms, running the H-VAC system periodically, and opening windows and doors (fans are also good for circulating air).

### MINIMIZING TRIGGERS: INDOOR AIR QUALITY AT SCHOOL

*Tools for Schools, a kit designed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, takes schools through a process resulting in a plan of action to improve indoor air quality. They have also developed practical and easy to follow check lists to aide schools in their initial assessment to address air quality. For more information: [www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/toolkit.html](http://www.epa.gov/iaq/schools/toolkit.html)*

### COMMON ASTHMA TRIGGERS

- Colds or flu
- Laughing or crying hard
- Allergens – Pollens, animal dander, dust and dust mites, cockroach droppings, mold
- Irritants – Cold air, strong smells and chemical sprays, chalk, lawn treatments and pesticides
- Second-hand smoke
- Diesel exhaust from idling buses
- Exercise

## 3 Fitness at School

Physical education teachers play an important role making sure that kids are able to participate in physical exercise at school by:

- Coordinating with room teacher to ensure students who require preventative medication take it before P.E.
- Including adequate warm-up and cool down periods.
- Being aware of each student's limitations.
- Closely monitoring students; especially those who have had a recent asthma episode, are experiencing symptoms, or are recovering from a respiratory infection.
- Surveying the environment for potential allergens and irritants.
- Making exercise modifications as necessary and involving students and medical provider when modifying student activity levels.
- When kids are unable to fully participate, keeping them involved in the activities (referee, timekeeper etc.).



“

Exercise is a must for all kids—especially kids with asthma. It's through regular exercise that children with asthma actually improve their lung function and this is important as their lungs may be compromised from asthma.

”

Dr. Michael Martin,  
asthma and allergy  
specialist

**TOP FIVE  
ASTHMA NEEDS OF  
SONOMA COUNTY'S  
SCHOOL NURSES**

- 1 Ensuring student access to medication
- 2 Having an Asthma Action Plan from a physician for each child with asthma
- 3 Providing asthma education for school staff
- 4 Tracking absence due to asthma
- 5 Accessing written educational materials for parents

## 4 Ready Access to Medication Can Save a Life



Whether a child has mild or severe asthma, an attack may strike with little warning and can progress to a level that is life-threatening within minutes. Medications that reduce asthma symptoms are necessary because not all triggers are avoidable. Most children with asthma should have ready access to prescription medication at school (commonly known as an “emergency” or a “quick-relief” inhaler). A recently passed state law allows students with written permission from their parent and physician to carry asthma medications on their person while at school. It is in

the best interest of schools to become familiar with this law and update their policies and health forms to be in compliance. In a recent survey of Sonoma County school nurses regarding asthmain schools, nurses identified ensuring student access to medication as their number one concern. School nurses also agree they need better tools and systems for identifying students with asthma.

**STUDENT  
SELF-CARRY  
(Ed. Code 49423.1)  
NOW THE LAW**

As of January 2005 the California Schools Asthma Medication Law went into effect. This law allows students who need prescribed asthma medication during the school day to carry and self-administer inhaled asthma medication if two requirements are met:

- 1) a written statement from physician, 2) a written statement from parent/guardian. Each of the statements has certain informational pieces that must be completed. Helpful links: [www.CAasthma.org](http://www.CAasthma.org)

## 5 The Asthma Friendly Schools Initiative

### DEVELOPING AN ASTHMA MANAGEMENT PLAN

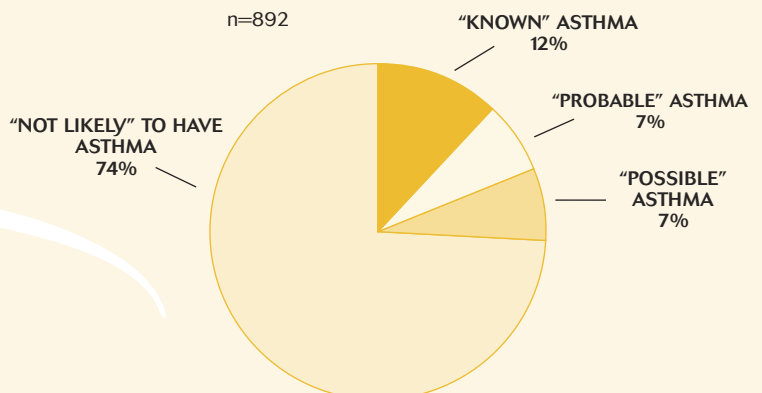
There are several effective programs available that address asthma in schools. The Asthma Friendly Schools Initiative (AFSI), created by the American Lung Association, is currently being piloted locally in the Roseland School District. The Roseland School District,

in partnership with the Sonoma County Asthma Coalition, has developed and begun implementing a plan to address asthma in Roseland’s four schools. Through this process, they have found low cost and time-efficient ways to work on this complex issue.

The AFSI project began with a written survey of the approximate 1,400 families of students enrolled in the Roseland District. The results of the survey indicated that approximately 19% of students are known to or likely to have asthma. The survey also showed that students with asthma are experiencing multiple asthma-related symptoms and that

asthma is affecting their school attendance, ability to exercise, and causing them to have more frequent visits to the emergency department. This high rate of emergency department use reported by those with diagnosed asthma indicates that despite being diagnosed, these students’ asthma is not under control and could benefit from better management.

**AFSI Survey Findings on Asthma Prevalence  
in Roseland School District**



**AFSI—  
BRIDGING  
HEALTHCARE  
AND HOME  
WITH SCHOOLS**

*The AFSI project seeks to meet a number of objectives related to improving the communication link between home, school and health care providers. These are the essential elements that occupy three corners of the treatment “triad” that form the basis of this effort. More information on AFSI can be found at [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)*



# Asthma Management Tips for Teachers

## Concern

## What to Do

**Student has trouble remembering to take medications, self-monitor and/or gauge progression of symptoms, and anticipate need for medication.**

- Reminder systems, such as notes on the student's desk or a watch with an alarm to remind them.
- Learn the outward signs of distress such as shallow breathing, coughing and sunken chest.
- If they have a peak flow meter, encourage them to use it.
- Student can attend Open Airways for Schools\* classes, if offered at their school. (see below)

**Student's asthma flares up frequently.**

- Become familiar with your student's individual asthma triggers.
- Minimize exposure to asthma triggers in classroom and on school grounds.
- Discuss the student with the school nurse.

**Student experiences embarrassment when using asthma inhaler in front of others.**

- Pay attention to demeanor (shallow breathing, reclusive body language, not talking) that might suggest a student is having trouble breathing.
- Provide a private place to take medication.
- Stay calm, be understanding and supportive as stress and anxiety can exacerbate asthma symptoms.



*Open Airways for Schools (OAS) is an award-winning curriculum designed by the American Lung Association to educate and support students in caring for their asthma. The program is a long-standing, proven effective series of six classes designed to be integrated into the school day. To date the program has been used successfully in seven Sonoma County schools. For more information go to [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org).*



115 Talbot Avenue  
Santa Rosa CA 95404

Ph: 707-527-5864  
Fx: 707-542-6111

[www.sonomaasthma.org](http://www.sonomaasthma.org)

The Sonoma County Asthma Coalition was formed in 2002 in response to the growing local concern about asthma. Approximately 30 organizations work together to pursue the mission: to improve the quality of life of people affected by asthma.

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