

Asthma in California

In California 1 in 6 children (1.5 million children) has been diagnosed with asthma.

— UCLA Center for Health Policy Research

“Asthma is a complex disease that requires a multifaceted approach to reduce its burden on the people of California. While there is no cure for asthma, there are a variety of medical and environmental interventions and policies that can help people prevent asthma and control its symptoms so as to have a minimal effect on peoples’ daily lives.”

— Rick Kreuzer, MD, Chief, Division of Environmental and Occupational Disease Control, California Department of Public Health



Having asthma makes it hard for many of California’s children to live, learn, and play. Asthma is the most common chronic disease in the U.S. and a leading cause of hospitalizations and school absences among children. In California, about 1.5 million or 1 in 6 children under 18 years of age has been diagnosed with asthma. In addition to asthma’s impact on the daily lives of children and families, society incurs a substantial cost in medical care and lost earnings because of asthma. We do not yet know how to cure asthma, but asthma-related deaths, hospitalizations, emergency-room visits, sick days, and symptoms are largely preventable.

Deaths, Hospitalizations, and Emergency Department Visits

The costs of asthma are enormous—hospitalizations alone cost \$770 million in California in 2007. This number does not include additional direct and indirect costs associated with asthma for medications, emergency-room use, and lost productivity. Appropriate prevention efforts can reduce the likelihood of serious asthma outcomes and their associated costs. These serious outcomes include the following in California:

- Approximately 20 children die each year because of asthma.
- Approximately 11 out of every 10,000 children under the age of 18 were hospitalized because of asthma in 2007, which adds up to nearly 11,000 hospitalizations that year.
- More than 63,000 Emergency Department (ED) visits were made by children under 18 in 2007, which means 64 ED visits for every 10,000 children in the state.

Asthma Impacts the Daily Life of Children: School Absenteeism, Symptoms, and Medication Use

The burden of asthma on children and their families is significant. Asthma is a leading cause of school absences, and

asthma attacks and symptoms can interfere with a child’s daily activities and quality of life. Appropriate prevention efforts can reduce the likelihood that children miss school or experience frequent symptoms. Below are some recent data on children in California:

- School-aged children miss approximately 1.9 million school days each year due to asthma, a rate of nearly 2.5 days per child with asthma per year.
- More than a third (35 percent) of all school-aged children with current asthma miss at least one day of school during the year because of asthma, and more than half (51 percent) of younger children (ages 5 to 11) miss school due to asthma.
- Approximately 809,000 children with asthma experience asthma symptoms every year, including 89,000 who experience symptoms every week.
- More than 350,000 children take medication to control their asthma every day.

Children of Color and Low-income Families Are Disproportionately Affected

Although asthma affects Americans of all ages, races, and ethnic groups, low-income and minority populations suffer substantially higher fatality rates, hospital admissions, and emergency-room visits because of asthma. Below are some recent data for California:

- The hospitalization rate and the rate of ED visits for asthma in California are both more than three times higher for African American children than for other children.
- Latino children have a higher rate of ED visits for asthma than white children. Currently, 1.1 million Latinos, including approximately 400,000 children and adolescents, suffer

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from asthma. Since Latinos are currently the state's fastest growing ethnic group and will eventually account for the majority of Californians, the potential impact of asthma on California and this population is enormous.

- Children in low-income families are more likely to miss school because of asthma than children in families with higher incomes.

Poor Environmental Conditions Mean More Asthma Attacks and More New Cases

Asthma-related symptoms, sick days, hospitalizations, ED visits, and deaths are largely preventable through a combination of consistent health care, appropriate use of medications, and decreased exposure to environmental triggers.

Many environmental pollutants have been implicated in causing or worsening asthma, and new information is accumulating rapidly. The evidence is the most consistent for the following pollutants:

- Air pollution created by vehicular traffic—especially diesel traffic—and some industrial and agricultural processes
- Poorly maintained schools and substandard housing, which expose children to indoor allergens such as mold, dust, and cockroaches
- Secondhand smoke from cigarettes

There is growing concern that exposure to respiratory irritants and chemicals that affect the immune system may play a role in asthma, including the following:

- Some cleaning products, building materials, and furnishings
- Pesticides, particularly in schools

Communities Across California Are Taking Action to Help Our Children Breathe Easier

Many communities face dilapidated schools, poor housing conditions, and outdoor air pollution from nearby industries and freeways. Families alone cannot initiate large-scale changes to improve their children's environments. We need to develop effective strategies to reduce asthma triggers through viable public policy. Policy change provides a long-lasting, far-reaching way to reduce environmental triggers.

Community Action to Fight Asthma (CAFA) is a network of asthma coalitions in California working to shape local, regional, and state policies to reduce the environmental triggers of asthma for school-aged children where they live, learn, and play. Please visit our website at www.rampasthma.org to learn more about CAFA, connect with local coalitions, locate asthma resources across California, and sign up for our e-newsletter.

Selected Bibliography *(For complete references, please visit www.rampasthma.org.)*

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