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Asthma – A Chronic, but Manageable Disease

Imagine running up and down the stairs several times. You're winded and need a moment to catch your breath. Now, imagine being forced to breathe through a narrow straw – the kind you typically use to stir your coffee. That struggle to get needed air through a tight space is what an asthma attack feels like.

An estimated 200,000 Iowans have asthma. While more adults have asthma than children, the asthma rate is rising faster in preschool-aged children than in any other age group. Asthma is now one of the most common chronic diseases of childhood, with between 45,000 and 50,000 Iowa children currently being diagnosed with asthma. In 2006, there were 2,173 hospitalizations due to asthma, with a price tag of \$6.9 million.

It's not known why asthma is so much more common now than 20 years ago. Health scientists believe the increase may be due to more contact with indoor allergens. For example, people spend more time indoors; children build up less of a natural immunity to allergens; and there is more outdoor air pollution. In addition, overall health among Americans is declining. People weigh more and exercise less.

Asthma is a disease that affects the lungs. It causes repeated attacks of wheezing, breathlessness, chest tightness, and nighttime or early morning coughing. Most of the problems caused by asthma could be avoided if people with the disease worked with their healthcare provider to manage the disease. Effective management includes four strategies:

1. Controlling exposure to known triggers for asthma attacks.
2. Adequately managing asthma with medicine.
3. Monitoring the disease by having a physician measure lung function.
4. Educating asthma patients to become partners in their own care.

While asthma is a chronic disease, it is manageable. Asthma should not limit exercise; in fact, your lungs work better and you feel better if you do exercise. Find a form of physical activity that works for you. If your symptoms are related to physical activity, talk to your doctor about what kind of exercise you can do, and what medicines to take. For more information on the Iowa Department of Public Health's Asthma Control program, visit www.idph.state.ia.us/hpcdp/asthma.asp.

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