



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Breathe Easier: Learn About Asthma

National Surveillance for Asthma — United States, 1980–2004

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

Wheezing, coughing, and shortness of breath are the frightening symptoms that a person with asthma experiences during an asthma attack. Asthma is a serious health problem and it can even be deadly. Asthma affects all ages. About one in three of those with asthma are under 18 and one in ten are 65 or older.

Dr. Paul Garbe, a researcher with CDC's National Center for Environmental Health, is here to discuss asthma. Dr. Garbe, welcome to the show.

[Dr. Garbe] Thank you, Matthew. It's nice to be here.

[Matthew Reynolds] Let's start at the beginning. What is asthma?

[Dr. Garbe] Asthma is a chronic disease that affects your lungs. It's caused by inflammation and that leads to swelling of the airways, and you'll get some mucus that fills the airways. It makes it very difficult to breathe. It's the most common long term disease of children, but it can affect adults as well.

[Matthew Reynolds] Are there some people who are more likely to get asthma than others?

[Dr. Garbe] Yes. We do know that people with allergies are more likely to have asthma. And if you have someone in your family that has asthma, you are also more likely to have asthma.

[Matthew Reynolds] What factors are likely to trigger an attack or make it harder to control?

[Dr. Garbe] Well, that's a good question. We don't know what causes asthma, but we do know some of the things that cause more difficult breathing for people or an asthma attack. Things like environmental tobacco smoke; say someone smokes in your home. Pet dander can cause an asthma attack, cockroach allergen, dust mites. In fact one of the more common problems that people will have is with dust mites in their home. It will cause severe asthma attacks.

[Matthew Reynolds] Why is it that some people who have asthma have milder cases and then there are other people who have asthma to such a degree that it's life threatening?

[Dr. Garbe] Well some people may not be able to control their asthma as well as they should be able to. They may not be using their medications appropriately or they may be encountering some triggers that they previously weren't aware of. And what will happen in those situations is you get a very severe constriction. The airflow in your lungs almost closes down completely. It's almost like suffocating.

[Matthew Reynolds] So if a person has asthma, what should they be doing to avoid the attacks?

[Dr. Garbe] Well, they should be avoiding their triggers, but more importantly though, they should see their doctor and make sure they have an asthma action plan that their doctor can provide. If their doctor has prescribed medications, they should be taking the medications regularly. Some of these would be short acting medications, some would be long acting medications, but if your doctor has prescribed both, it's important for you to be using both of those, according to the instructions that your doctor gives you.

[Matthew Reynolds] For a typical asthma sufferer, how often do those asthma action plans, as you called them, need to be adjusted?

[Dr. Garbe] Well, the frequency really would depend on the individual, whether they have what we would call a mild intermittent asthma or a severe case of asthma. So that is up to the judgment of both the doctor and you. Could be that you need to adjust your plan yearly. For some people they might need to be adjusting their plan perhaps monthly.

[Matthew Reynolds] How many people are suffering from asthma and does that represent an increase, a decline over time?

[Dr. Garbe] Well, we know that more than 20 million people in the United States have asthma. We have seen increases in the prevalence of asthma, that is, the number of people who have asthma, over time. But one thing that we have noticed as we've monitored the statistics on asthma is that, for those people who do have asthma, the number of visits to the doctors has remained about stable over time.

[Matthew Reynolds] Where can our listeners get more information about asthma management and prevention strategies?

[Dr. Garbe] Well, we have a website - [w-w-w-dot-cdc-dot-gov-slash-asthma](http://www.cdc.gov/asthma). And on the website you can find information about how you can control your asthma. You can also find information about the programs that we have at CDC where we help state health departments develop asthma control programs in their states and we do have links to

some of the other federal agencies that have asthma programs, such as the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and the Environmental Protection Agency.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Garbe, thank you so much for taking the time to share this information with our listeners.

[Dr. Garbe] Glad to be here.

[Matthew Reynolds] That's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.