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In D-FW, 'sobering' asthma numbers

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Look at a third-grade class or a youth soccer game, and start counting.

"One, two, three, asthma; one, two, three, asthma," said Larry Tubb, senior vice president for system planning at Cook Children's Health Care System. "That's sobering."

It represents a growing health problem in North Texas, where 1 in 4 children ages 8 and 9 has the lung disease. The state average for 5- to 9-year-olds is 7.1 percent; the national average for all children is 9.4 percent.

The new findings come from the Community-wide Children's Health Assessment and Planning Survey, which explores several top health concerns in detail, including accidents, abuse, dental care, obesity, mental-health care and access. The project, led by Cook Children's, involved representatives from health departments, social service agencies and other groups.

The results of the survey, which Cook Children's calls the first known project of its kind in the country, will be presented today during the first Children's Health Summit at Norris Conference Center in Sundance Square.

It is expected to give a much better picture of the state of children's health in North Texas and could pave the way for better care. Parents, community leaders and others will be able to access the information, which was collected in 2008 and 2009.

To reach their conclusions, researchers studied new and existing data, created a technical review panel, interviewed "special populations" such as the homeless and held focus groups with parents.

The survey provides "a level of detail that we have never had," Tubb said. "We don't know what causes asthma, but it is controllable and now we have a place to act."

Asthma is a widespread public health problem that has been dramatically increasing over the last 30 years, said Dr. Nancy Dambro, medical director for pulmonary medicine at Cook Children's Medical Center. Most children growing up in the 1950s and '60s didn't know anyone with the disease, she said.

"Now, clearly, every classroom is going to have at least one kid and probably more with it," she said.

While asthma has long been prevalent in Texas, the survey shows its high incidence in Tarrant, Hood, Parker, Johnson, Wise and Denton counties. The disease peaks at ages 8 and 9 with 25 percent affected. But it remains a serious health issue among older children, with 1 in 5 ages 10 to 14 diagnosed with the disease. Twenty-five percent is an awfully high number, said Dr. Rebecca Gruchalla, chief of allergy and immunology at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas. It's possible the survey results include children who have been mislabeled as having asthma because they had wheezing and coughing, she said.

Still, asthma is no doubt increasing in North Texas, across the nation and around the world, Gruchalla said.

It is a disease that can have serious repercussions. From 2002 to 2006, asthma was the underlying cause of 1,202 deaths in Texas, according to the Texas Asthma Control Program.

"It is definitely the most common cause of missed school days and is one of most common causes of ER visits and hospitalizations," Dambro said.

Children who suffer from asthma are at a higher risk from the H1N1 flu. Although 8 percent of the U.S. population has asthma, 32 percent of those who were hospitalized with H1N1 had asthma, according to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention.

The cause of asthma is not known, but exposure to poor air quality can exacerbate symptoms, Gruchalla said. Obesity has also been linked to the disease.

"We are in an area of the country known for pollutants and allergens," she said.

Among the worst offenders: dust mites and cockroaches, which can make asthma worse in people who are sensitive.

Although asthma can be controlled with medications, adherence to the regimen is often a challenge for children.

"Sometimes people can't afford the medications or they think the child can do it on his own," Dambro said. "Sometimes they are really worried about giving a steroid medicine even though we know it is safe."

Some parents don't seek therapy.

"They think it is normal for a child to cough every day," she said.

Children who have intermittent symptoms can be treated with an inhaler, but someone who has persistent asthma needs preventative medication, typically a steroid.

The disease typically follows children into adulthood.

"Patients can have remissions from asthma and symptoms can get better, but the old notion that people outgrow asthma — we don't really think that is true," Dambro said.

The good news: It is treatable at any age.

"Patients who have asthma and take their medication regularly should be able to have a completely normal life," she said.

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Dr. Nancy Dambro,
medical director for pulmonary medicine at Cook Children's Medical Center

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