

Aug 17, 2004

Study finds often adults misguided in efforts to reduce asthma triggers in children

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Morning News

Tracey Singletary diligently washes 3-year old Zanovia's pillows and linens each week. She has also replaced carpeting, runs a humidifier, and never dusts or vacuums unless her daughter is in bed. Zanovia has asthma, so Singletary is doing her best to provide the healthiest environment possible.

But this mother's good intentions have the potential to do more harm than good.

Parents of children with asthma are often misguided in their efforts to reduce symptom triggers, a University of Michigan study has found. Researchers report that of 1,788 preventive measures taken by parents of 896 asthmatic children, only half were likely to do any good. In some cases, asthma-proofing techniques had the potential to cause more harm. For example, that humidifier Singletary turns on each night in Zanovia's room is actually creating an atmosphere that is very dust mite friendly. "Dust mites thrive in humidity, so the more moisture, the bigger the problem with mites," said Dr. Joseph Moyer of the Allergy, Asthma, and Sinus Center in Florence. "You only want to use a humidifier around here just a couple times a year, such as in the dead of winter when the air is extremely dry. The humidity actually promotes the growth of mites and molds, so you don't want to add to that."

If Zanovia's asthma was triggered by pollen, however, reducing the household mite population (and, they are in every household no exception) would not be nearly as effective as keeping windows closed. Knowing what triggers a child's asthma is the first step in reducing the risk of an attack, and those steps must be appropriate for the trigger.

"The first level of education for parents is to learn that much of asthma occurs as a reaction to triggers in the environment, and that everyone's triggers are different," said study co-author Dr. Toby Lewis, an assistant professor of pediatrics in the University of Michigan's School of Medicine. "Once you have a child's triggers figured out, the parents need education on what to do."

"There's a lack of good information out there about what works, and even when we know what works, it can be hard to do such as reducing smoke in a child's environment or quitting smoking. Even when parents know in their head it's the right things to do, translating that into change is hard." Most parents take a good look around the house in their initial efforts to get rid of triggers, and that's not a bad place to start, Moyer said. "You try to eliminate irritants: smoke from smoking cigarettes or from wood-burning stoves, kerosene heaters, dust mites, molds, pet dander these are some of the things that can trigger asthma," he said.

"We can test children to determine what they are allergic to, and that is valuable information when it comes to taking preventive measures. Of course, cigarette smoke is a universal allergen for children whether they have asthma or not."

Confusion about what works is also common, especially in light of the many "miracle" remedies being marketed for allergy and asthma sufferers.

"Parents hear 'Sprinkle this on your carpet,' or 'Clean out your air ducts,' or 'Buy this air ionizer,' and parents who are desperate to help their kids can get misled into spending money on things of questionable value," Lewis said.

"The bottom line is, talk to your doctor before you spend a lot of money, and do the cheap, easy things first."

That's what Singletary did first changing her cleaning habits then, as a last resort, replacing the carpeting. But, even that strategy has its shortcomings.

"It's better to just get rid of carpeting if you know someone has an allergy to dust mites, because they (the mites) tend to get down into the padding no matter how clean the carpet is," Moyer said. "A floor that you can clean with a wet mop is the best."

But Singletary didn't have the luxury of choice in this matter.

"I know it's better to have the carpet gone, but I live in an apartment where I'm not at liberty to rip the carpet out," she said.

"So I just try to keep it as clean as possible, and thought replacing the old carpet with something newer would be better than doing nothing at all. But I do know one thing: that humidifier is going."

Lewis and Moyer recommend that parents of asthmatic children seek the advice of an allergist or pulmonologist to determine what preventive measures would be most effective for their child.

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