

## **THIS WORLD ASTHMA DAY, LET'S STOP THE SUFFERING**

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Asthma is harming our children. One in six California kids has been diagnosed with the disease, and the numbers are growing. One reason? Children can't escape the triggers of asthma attacks. They are everywhere children spend their time: outside, in their homes and in their schools. Asthma is the number one cause of school absences due to chronic disease according to the U.S. EPA. There are many ways to reduce the suffering. Isn't it time for our lawmakers to do something more about it?

The causes of asthma remain somewhat of a medical mystery, but many of the specific triggers that cause sometimes fatal asthma attacks are well-known. Though we cannot yet cure the disease, there are ways to reduce the risk of its onset, as well as the misery of the symptoms — if our policy makers muster the political will. One major trigger that can be addressed by law and regulation is air pollution. Smog and the tiny particles, called particulates, produced by burning fossil fuels, as well as dust from construction and agriculture, among other activities, are major causes of asthma attacks. But asthma sufferers aren't alone in being harmed. Air pollution can cause asthma symptoms and other lung diseases in otherwise healthy people.

The health hazards of air pollution were recognized long ago and great strides have been made in clearing the air, but it's not enough, particularly in low-income, communities of color. State and local governments, such as the California Air Resources Board and local air quality management districts, must implement aggressive regulations to reduce emissions from diesel trucks, ships, trains, industrial equipment, automobiles, power plants, refineries and other sources.

In addition to further regulation and enforcement, we need a new approach to understanding the potential health threats of development. Almost 40 years ago, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) recognized the importance of assessing the impacts of proposed projects on our environment. In response, California quickly enacted its own California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Today, the California Healthy Places Act (AB 1472) would promote analysis of how new residential, commercial and industrial developments affect human health. Much like Environmental Impact Statements, these Health Impact Assessments would go a long way toward identifying and reducing the triggers of asthma attacks.

Outdoor air pollution, however, isn't the only threat to our health. Indoor air pollution — in both schools and homes — is also a serious problem. In schools where our children spend a great deal of their time, dust, mold, chemicals and inadequate ventilation all conspire against their health. More resources must be allocated for school maintenance and repair to reduce the risks and promote healthy school environments.

Kids can't always escape poor outdoor air or school environment triggers by returning to the comfort of their homes. Too often, their home's air quality can contribute to the problem. There, dust mites, mold, animal dander, cockroach and rodent residue, tobacco smoke and pollen can all sicken asthma sufferers. These problems are particularly prevalent in older and less well-

maintained housing. As a consequence, asthma afflicts poor families far more than those who are better off. African Americans and Latinos also suffer disproportionately.

The answer to the indoor air pollution problem includes the enforcement of state and local housing codes and increasing tenants' rights to safe and healthy housing. Requiring the use of "green" or asthma-friendly construction materials and practices for both renovated and new housing will also help eliminate many of the offending chemicals.

Though asthma cannot yet be cured, much can be done to reduce its harmful health effects and the personal and institutional costs associated with avoidable emergency room visits and school absences. All it takes is the understanding of the connection between asthma triggers in our indoor and outdoor environments and the will of our legislators and public officials to address the problem.

May 6 is World Asthma Day. What better day for all of us to step up our commitment to the health of our children?