

Report says asthma care needs work

Of the nearly one in 10 New Mexicans who have asthma, more than a third of children and nearly half of adults have the disease under poor control, according to a new state Department of Health report.

The chronic lung disease causes some 7,700 emergency room visits and 1,800 hospitalizations a year in New Mexico, ringing up an estimated \$30 million a year in hospital charges, the report found.

The report also shows that most asthma patients fail to take relatively cheap and easy steps to eliminate asthma “triggers” in the home, such as keeping carpeting and pets out of the bedroom.

Triggers include a wide variety of factors that can worsen asthma, including tobacco smoke, dust mites, mold, and allergens from pets, rodents and cockroaches.

Asthma triggers

Asthma triggers are anything in the environment that makes asthma worse. They can include:

- Irritants such as cigarette smoke, air pollution, chemicals or dust in the workplace, and compounds in home air fresheners and sprays.
- Sulfites in foods and drinks.
- Medicines such as aspirin or other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs.
- Physical activity, including exercise.

For more information, visit the state Department of Health asthma website at www.nmhealth.org/eheb/asthma.shtml.

The report suggests that health officials and health care providers need to do a better job of educating patients about ways to control asthma.

“Patients just aren’t aware of things they can do to reduce their exposure,” said Adam Resnick, asthma program manager and epidemiologist for the state Department of Health.

“While we know about the triggers and we know the steps you need to take to reduce them, often times they are not taught to people,” he said. “It’s not a conversation that a doctor will always have with their asthma patients.”

One of the simplest ways to reduce asthma triggers is to remove rugs and carpets from bedrooms and keep out the family pets.

But surveys of New Mexicans with asthma found that 69 percent of adults and 72 percent of children have rugs and carpets in their bedrooms.

Surveys also found that 78 percent of adults and 66 percent of children with asthma allow pets in their bedrooms.

Most asthma patients also failed to make simple changes to control dust mites, such as using plastic covers on pillows and mattresses and washing bedding in hot water.

Asthma, a chronic inflammatory disease of the lungs, affects 9 percent of New Mexico children and nearly 10 percent of adults. Symptoms include shortness of breath, chest tightness, wheezing and coughing.

Medical treatments can help control asthma, including inhaled corticosteroids useful for managing persistent asthma, the report said.

But the study found that only 42 percent of New Mexico adults with asthma, and just 30 percent of children, had used an inhaled corticosteroid in the previous three months.

New Mexico hospitals charged \$30 million in 2009 to treat patients with a primary diagnosis of asthma, the report said. About 64 percent of those costs were charged to Medicaid and Medicare.

“Economically, (asthma) is a very expensive disease to treat, considering that almost one in 10 people in the state has it,” Resnick said.