

Back to School with Allergies and Asthma

Albert S. Hartel, M.D.

Going to school gives children exposure to knowledge, excitement, friends, and, unfortunately, also to new allergy triggers. Challenges facing students at school range from discomfort affecting concentration and behavior, to breathing symptoms that reduce the ability to participate in activities, to absences due to hay fever, and even life-threatening reactions to food or insect stings. In the US, more than 9 million children suffer from asthma, and 8% of children younger than six experience food intolerances. Together they account for more than 14 million missed school days and millions of dollars in medical costs and lost work days for parents.

If your child has been diagnosed with allergies or asthma, it is critical to have an action plan in place before starting school. Measures you can take include touring the school to identify potential asthma/allergy triggers in the classrooms. Inform the staff of your child's allergies, and ask about school policies regarding foods brought into the classroom, parties, and animals in school. If symptoms flare up at school, it may be the result of exposure to allergens such as animal dander brought in on the clothing of pet-owning classmates, seasonal pollen or mold growth in the school building. Chalk dust and variable humidity control may also be triggers. Food allergic children should consider bringing a bag lunch, and avoid sharing food with friends. Parents should make sure those children who have been prescribed epinephrine have it readily available and that a staff member is trained to identify serious allergic reactions and administer epinephrine quickly in an emergency.

Parents whose children have asthma should make sure they are familiar with the school's policy on carrying inhaled medications and that your child understands how to get the medication without delay when needed. Teachers, coaches, and the school nurse should all be familiar with your child's condition and doctor's recommendations regarding pretreatment before activity as well as acute or emergency asthma treatment. Provide school personnel with phone numbers to call with questions or in case of an emergency and make sure recommendations are written and available to substitute teachers. Talk to your children about knowing their own limits and stress the importance of responding to their asthma symptoms immediately. Help them understand that they should not be embarrassed about their condition or feel that they are different. Establishing a routine of taking all maintenance medications on a daily basis before school will help reduce symptoms, minimize exacerbations and get the most out of their school experience.