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Back-to-School means beware of asthma for some

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Teachers and other school workers encouraged to watch for signs of an attack

Asthma is a leading cause of death and disability in children younger than 18 years old. It is one of the leading causes of hospitalization in school-age children. Since children spend up to 30 percent of their day in school, experts say it is imperative that everyone involved in the school system, from teachers to bus drivers, understand the condition and how to treat it.

"It's not just teachers and school nurses who need to be able to deal with asthma," said Dana Evans, respiratory therapy clinical instructor at MU. "The office staff, bus drivers and janitors also need to be informed. Sometimes, especially in rural areas, there is only one nurse who covers several schools. It's up to teachers and others to recognize impending symptoms and take appropriate actions."

As students go back to school, there could be plenty of asthma triggers waiting for them, Evans said. Buildings without air conditioning often have open windows that create more problematic dust. The odor from the particles released by dry eraser markers and chalk dust also are triggers. Textbooks that are old and musty can create problems and, in some schools, mold is an issue. Classrooms with pets such as gerbils can cause allergic reactions in some children.

Evans stresses the importance of having an asthma action plan on file for asthmatic students. The plan should include contact information for the child's doctor and a list of medications, such as inhalers or spacers, and how to properly use them. School employees also should be trained on how to recognize signs and symptoms of an impending asthma attack.

"When we think of asthma we often think of full-blown wheezing and shortness of breath," Evans said. "However, for many kids, a full-blown attack can be preceded by a persistent cough, complaints of not feeling well and not behaving properly instead of the classic signs."

Evans said that approximately two out of 30 students in a classroom will have asthma. Asthma is the cause of 14.7 million lost school days in children ages five to 18 and affects more than five million children.