Back to School in 2014! Be prepared for an Asthma Spike

What is the February asthma spike?
Throughout the year there are significant increases, or ‘spikes’, in asthma presentations to hospitals and emergency departments. Approximately 1 in 10 children in Australia have asthma, and for children and adolescents with asthma these ‘spikes’ usually occur towards the end of holiday periods as they return to school and preschool. A significant ‘spike’ in asthma presentations and admissions to hospital of children and adolescents, experiencing severe asthma exacerbations, occurs throughout the first few weeks of February.

Triggers that can be encountered are:
- Dust and mould spores from poorly ventilated, or insufficiently cleaned school rooms
- Respiratory viruses, such as cold and flu viruses
- Cleaning products that leave behind strong smells, aerosols or airborne dust
- Anxiety and stress due to returning to school

What can we do to avoid asthma exacerbations in our school?
- Ensure your school has a sufficient number of Asthma Emergency Kits
- Ensure that each Asthma Emergency Kits contain fresh and in-date reliever medication (e.g. Ventolin, Asmol or Airomir), spacers, record sheet and instructions detailing the emergency procedure
- Ensure student Asthma Action Plans are updated and returned to school
- Ensure staff education and training is current, arranging a free staff asthma education session as required for all new and ongoing staff
- Ensure your school’s asthma policy is current for both onsite and offsite situations, and first aid posters are displayed in key locations
- Ensure staff are aware of which students in their class have asthma, and know where Asthma Emergency Kits are stored
- Ensure all classrooms are opened, cleaned and aired out in the weeks before students return to school. A helpful technique can be to turn on all fans, as well as any heating/cooling systems, to begin to clear dust before students arrive

Why does the spike occur?
While there have not been direct links established, the February ‘asthma spike’ is believed to be largely due to children and adolescents coming into contact with asthma triggers that they have had time away from, as they are now returning to school. Forgetting to take their medication, and poor medication adherence, also places students at an increased risk of asthma attacks when exposed to triggers.
New approach to working with schools across Australia

The Australian Government Department of Health has provided ongoing funding for Asthma Australia and its member Asthma Foundations to continue to provide training for staff in schools, as well as other education settings (e.g. Child Care staff; Trainee teachers & Child Care Workers).

In addition we have been asked to develop approaches to engage both students with asthma and their parents/carers in the scope of our work. Through a short survey of 70 schools nationally, it was clear that a flexible approach was needed to be able to work meaningfully with the diverse range of school communities.

We are developing a variety of ways to work through schools and engage with students with asthma and their parents/carers, including face-to-face and online options.

It is our intention to target the whole student group (this was strongly stated in the survey responses), including a focus on how to help a friend/classmate in case of an asthma attack.

For parents/carers of students with asthma we are exploring options such as Expert Q&A sessions in local health/community settings (including webinar access) and Live Well with Asthma sessions at various venues and online. The ultimate aim is to connect parents/carers with their local Asthma Foundation through the new Asthma Assist initiative.

These and other approaches will be in place from 1 April 2014. As part of providing staff training for your setting, Asthma Foundation staff and trainers will also be making contact about these new opportunities and working with you to identify suitable ways to engage meaningfully with your school community.

National Young People and Asthma Strategy

Additionally, Asthma Australia has also been funded to implement this strategy for 12-25 year olds with asthma across Australia. We will work with secondary school students to contribute to achieving this. A major focus will be to develop a tool to encourage better medication adherence through self-management.

Survey including secondary students

A starting point for young people with asthma is a survey we will distribute to gather baseline information and to identify young people who want to contribute to our processes. This will inform our research and provide opportunities for respondents to join a forum and to become members of a reference group for the project evaluators.

This survey will be sent to schools following ethics approval. We will encourage you to inform secondary students with asthma about this and for them to contribute to this worthwhile research that will have international significance.