

# Asthma rates drive up costs

More kids diagnosed with the disease.

U.S. spends \$56 billion a year to treat chronic condition.

By **Misty Williams**  
mwilliams@ajc.com

When her son Luis was 8 months old, Teresa Mustelier remembers watching him struggle to inhale.

"You had this little baby, and he's using everything in his muscle arsenal to try to breathe," the Decatur mom said.

He would use his entire abdomen and chest to suck in one slight breath. After several hospital trips, the diagnosis was clear: asthma.

The chronic condition is a growing problem across Georgia — especially in met-

ro Atlanta, with its perennial traffic congestion and decades of poor air quality. The metro area has had at least four code orange days so far this smog season, when children and other sensitive groups are encouraged to limit outside activities.

Children like Luis are particularly vulnerable to smog because their lungs and immune systems are still developing. Last year, about 12 percent of Georgia children had asthma, up from 10 percent in 2005, state data show. That's compared with 9.6 percent nationally.

Throughout the country, the number of asthma sufferers climbed by 4.3 million from 2001 to 2009, according to a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Aggravated by smog, mold, pollen, smoke and other triggers,

**Health care** continued on D2

## Tips on dealing with asthma

While asthma is a lifelong disease, parents, school officials and coaches can help children manage the illness by educating themselves, said Dr. Ann-Marie Brooks of Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

Smog tends to be the worst from 2 to 7 p.m., so children shouldn't be doing strenuous aerobic activities during those times, she said.

"There are so many simple things we can do just by being aware of what the risks are," Brooks said.

Parents also should know that with a doctor's permission children can carry their own inhalers in case of emergencies, which is becoming more critical as the number of school nurses dwindles, Brooks said.

# Pollution: 'Horrific to bad'

## Health care

continued from D1

asthma can cause wheezing, coughing and other symptoms.

It's among a number of increasingly prevalent chronic illnesses putting pressure on America's health care system.

Chronic diseases such as asthma and diabetes account for about two-thirds of the growth in health care spending, said Ken Thorpe, an expert in the field at Emory University. "That's one of the key drivers in rising insurance premiums."

Asthma costs in the U.S. rose to about \$56 billion in 2007 (the latest data available), up from \$53

billion in 2002, the CDC report showed. In Georgia, asthma-related emergency room charges totaled more than \$63 million, with hospitalizations costing more than \$132 million in 2007, according to the state Department of Community Health.

Controlling costs means making sure people take their medications and stay healthy to avoid costly trips to the emergency room, Thorpe said. Nationwide, about 11 percent of insured and 40 percent of uninsured people with asthma can't afford their prescription drugs, according to the CDC.

Some forward-thinking employers and insurers are beginning to offer medications for free to people with chronic illnesses, he said. "If these people don't take them, they end up costing more money."

Eight-year-old Lucas Bergin, who lives in Atlanta's Grant Park area, has been on daily asthma medication since he was 2. He needs at least two

prescriptions a month and each has \$25 or \$30 co-pays, said his mother, Michelle Bergin. "I don't know how families without good medical care or financial support do it."

The medication has helped control Lucas' asthma, but there are still days he sits in the library instead of joining his classmates at recess because the smog is so bad.

No definitive evidence shows air pollution causes people to develop asthma, but it is a significant factor in triggering symptoms, said Matt Strickland, an assistant professor of environmental health at Emory.

Smog, or ground-level ozone, forms when sun-

**Schools are taking steps to deal with the problem air by reducing air pollution.**

light creates a chemical reaction among air pollutants from vehicle exhaust and other sources. Metro Atlanta ranked No. 23 in a 2011 analysis by the American Lung Association of U.S. cities with the biggest ozone problems.

Atlanta has long struggled to meet federal air pollution guidelines. In March, the Environmental Protection Agency announced the metro area had finally met the 1997 federal ozone standard. But with new, more stringent guidelines set to take effect this summer, the state has a long way to go, experts say.

"Just because we've gone from horrific to bad, doesn't mean we're doing better," said Dr. Ann-Marie Brooks, a pediatric pulmonologist at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

Inner city children are especially at risk, Brooks said.

Average asthma rates are typically between 10 percent and 12 percent, while rates in the inner

city can be 20 percent to 25 percent, Brooks said. Urban areas tend to have the most freeways running through them, car pollution and older housing that may not have air conditioning, she said.

Dust and old gas stoves also contribute to indoor pollution in houses with poor ventilation, she said. "It's not like you can go inside your house to escape the bad air outside."

People with low incomes also have higher asthma rates. The asthma rate for Georgia adults with incomes of \$75,000 or more is 5.2 percent, compared with 10.5 percent for those who make less than \$15,000, CDC data show.

Schools are taking steps to deal with the problem

by reducing air pollution. Some are retrofitting diesel school buses with pollution control devices; others are instituting no idling policies in car pool lanes.

State Rep. Stephanie Stuckey Benfield, D-Atlanta, who has worked to get federal funds for school bus retrofits, said she hopes Atlanta's leaders will consider more bicycle lanes, pedestrian paths and public transportation options as they plan for the future.

Air pollution is damaging for all children, said Benfield, whose son has asthma and has been rushed to the hospital. "I have no doubt that living in Atlanta increased the chance he would get asthma."

**MEMORIAL DAY SALE**  
10-40% OFF everything in the showroom including special orders\*



ALL KUKA LEATHER  
**20% OFF**