

News Release



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Two days' worth of events scheduled to mark World Asthma Day in Minnesota

A coalition of health professionals, public health agencies, advocacy groups and voluntary organizations will sponsor two days' worth of events this week to mark World Asthma Day in Minnesota.

On Tuesday – the day when World Asthma Day will officially be observed worldwide – the Minnesota Asthma Coalition (MAC) will hold its third annual meeting at the Sheraton Four Points Hotel in St. Paul. The following day – at the same location – the American Lung Association of Minnesota (ALAMN) will sponsor a day-long conference on the management of asthma in the state's increasingly diverse ethnic and cultural communities.

The MAC meeting will include sharing of projects and ideas generated by regional asthma coalitions across the state, as well as exhibits on asthma-related issues. The Wednesday conference will focus on issues like how to provide asthma care in diverse populations, and how to care for patients while respecting divergent cultural beliefs.

Organizers of these events hope they will serve to focus greater attention on the prevention and treatment of asthma – and the impact the illness has on people in our state. They hope the event will raise awareness of asthma issues on the part of both health care providers and the general public.

“Asthma is a significant health concern – and a significant public health issue – both here in Minnesota and nationwide,” said Ron Van Beusekom, senior manager of the Minnesota Asthma Coalition. “While many people think of it as a disease of childhood, it actually affects people of all ages. Unless it is properly managed and controlled, it can be costly in economic as well as human terms. It can result in expensive trips to the hospital or the emergency room, and impose significant limitations on people's activities.

“Helping physicians, people with asthma and their families to control this illness properly is the key to preventing these problems, and averting the kind of harm that this illness can cause,” Van Beusekom said.

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Although no figures are available on the prevalence of asthma in Minnesota's children, the illness affects 7-8% of all adult Minnesotans, Van Beusekom noted. The prevalence is slightly higher in the Twin Cities area than in other parts of the state.

While asthma-related fatalities are relatively uncommon, the illness accounts for over a hundred deaths a year in Minnesota. About three-fourths of those asthma-related deaths occur in the elderly.

Although asthma deaths are rare in children, the illness accounts for three out of every thousand hospitalizations in children under the age of five.

A survey involving children who attended elementary schools in Minneapolis highlighted the impact asthma can have on families. In the survey, over half of parents whose children had asthma reported that they had missed work or school during a one month period in 2000, in order to deal with their children's illness.

People with asthma are more likely to describe their own health as "poor" or only "fair." They are also more likely to have their activities limited in some way by their illness.

In addition to appropriate medical care, effective control of asthma includes control of environmental factors that could trigger an asthma episode. Those triggers can include things like second hand tobacco smoke, mold, pets, the dust mites that are present in most homes, and household pests.

Potential barriers to effective control of the illness include lack of education on the part of patients or their parents, lack of access to health care, the cost of needed medications, lack of an appropriate management plan, and the need to improve physician knowledge about the illness.

The Minnesota Asthma Coalition has been an important vehicle for promoting better management and control of asthma, Van Beusekom said. MAC was originally established so that individuals and groups working with asthma issues would have a forum for the exchange of information about asthma, and a platform for encouraging and coordinating asthma prevention activities.

ALAMN played a leadership role in founding the group, with support from the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH). Members of MAC include health care professionals, public health officials, school officials, representatives of housing and environmental groups, and people living with the illness.

Working with regional asthma coalitions around the state, MAC has supported efforts to prevent the illness or its effects, increase public awareness, provide culturally sensitive education about the illness, and ensure that asthma patients have access to appropriate care. The regional coalitions have also taken on the task of monitoring, analyzing and disseminating information about the illness.

The MAC annual meeting is scheduled to begin at 1:30 p.m. on Tuesday. The Wednesday event – "Improving Asthma Management Among Diverse Populations" – will kick off at 8:00 a.m., with welcoming remarks from Rosemarie Rodriguez-Hagar, representing the MDH Office of Minority and Multicultural Health.

