Asthma in the Emergency Department

Uncontrolled asthma sends one out of every three children with asthma to the Emergency Department (ED) each year. This disease that takes your breath away is the number one cause of hospitalizations for children under the age of 15 according to the American Lung Association.

These numbers have not gone unnoticed in the Pediatric ED at Upper Chesapeake Medical Center. Through the efforts of Sherry Summers, RN, and a multidisciplinary team of ED nurses, respiratory therapists, pharmacists and emergency medicine physician specialists, evidenced-based protocols for the treatment of children with asthma were put in place at Upper Chesapeake Health’s Emergency Departments.

“Our goal was to ensure that when a child came into our Emergency Department in respiratory distress, we delivered the best, most appropriate care based on national standards no matter what time of day or night they come into the ED,” said Ms. Summers. Studies show that standardizing a treatment approach based on accepted, consistent definitions of what constitutes an asthma exacerbation has a positive impact that leads to better outcomes.

“There is an art to medicine, but the science behind it is just as important and that’s what we are trying to do with our asthma protocols,” said Ms. Summers. “The art comes from working with the families and observing the ‘little things’ about what treatment is working and what’s not. While our protocols meet national guidelines, we make a concerted effort to make them user-friendly for our young patients and their parents.”

Dedicated to standardizing the care for children with asthma, the UCH team put the science to work and revised its respiratory therapy, nursing and physician order procedures for those children at high risk for asthma exacerbation. When the new protocols were rolled out in December 2010, the results were immediate and significant.

“We increased the use of the standardized care plans and the performance of peak flow measurements which resulted in improved patient outcomes including decreased door to steroid administration time and decreased admissions to a Pediatric ICU for asthma exacerbations,” said Ms. Summers. The peak flows measure the effectiveness of the asthma treatment.

A huge goal of the new protocols was to decrease the time it takes to deliver steroid treatment once a young patient reaches the ED door. According to Ms. Summers, “The door to steroid time dropped by 17 minutes, which is considerable when you have a young child in respiratory distress.”

“Parents in the community who have children with asthma can take comfort in knowing that we have made a huge commitment to providing proactive asthma treatment,” said Dr. Kimmie Cass, Director of the Pediatric ED at Upper Chesapeake Medical Center. “As emergency medicine physicians, we are extremely comfortable taking care of a child who presents with an asthma exacerbation. As more and more families seek medical care in the emergency department for asthma attacks, it is our responsibility to recognize those children who are not adequately managed, to develop asthma action plans and ensure appropriate care is initiated in all healthcare settings,” she added.
Dr. Cass is also quick to recognize the importance of having physicians who are board certified in pediatric medicine, and a nursing staff specially trained in pediatric emergency care and advanced life support.

“Our connection to the University of Maryland ExpressCare ground and air ambulance offers a vital service for our emergency patients, said Ms. Summers. “All we have to do is pick up the phone and dial 1234 and we are tied into a network of critical care consults and critical care transports to tertiary care centers.”

In addition, third year emergency medicine residents from the University of Maryland complete their pediatric rotation at UCMC. Many of these residents chose Upper Chesapeake’s Pediatric ED as their favorite experience because of the quality of the facility, care administered and the nursing team.

Upper Chesapeake Medical Center’s Pediatric ED marries a child-friendly environment with state-of-the-art resources. The department sees children and teens from birth through age 18.

“Helping reduce fear and stress for children and families is a high priority at Upper Chesapeake Medical Center,” says Dr. Cass, “Children deserve treatment in a place that focuses entirely on them.”

For more information about the Pediatric ED, call 443-643-2063.