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It'll take your breath away

Asthma growing problem as disease affects 20 million Americans

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"It's scary," said 14-year-old Riverdale High School freshman Josh Wallace of what it's like to have an asthma attack. "It's overwhelming. You can't catch your breath, but at the same time you are breathing fine. It's like you have your breath, but you can't get to it. It's like something is between you and your breath and you just can't reach it. You can't get to it."

Wallace is one of 20 million Americans who suffer from asthma, a chronic inflammation of the bronchial tubes inside the lungs. The ailment causes wheezing, shortness of breath and chest tightness. And, in severe cases, it can be deadly. According to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 14 people die from asthma every day.

Dr. Prakash Patel, a pulmonologist at StoneCrest Medical Center in Smyrna, said no one knows why people develop asthma, but genetics and external factors play a role in the emergence of symptoms.

"Allergens like pollen, mold, house dust and animal dander are some triggers," he said. "A viral infection in childhood can cause asthma. Exercise, cold air and acid reflux, especially at night, can cause an increase in symptoms."

Wallace, a wide receiver and outside linebacker for the Riverdale Warriors freshman football team, said he has had firsthand experience with many of the "triggers" Patel mentioned.

"I don't play baseball anymore," said the young athlete. "It's in the springtime and that's when all my allergies act up."

So far, asthma hasn't prevented him from participating in football, but the weather plays havoc with his condition.

"The heat takes your breath away," he explained. "It's hard, but if it's cold your breath isn't even there. It's

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very, very hard to catch your breath when it's cold. It's like the more you can get, the better. When it's hot, there's more pressure on your lungs, but it's still easier to breathe when it's hot."

Dr. Patel said that since Wallace is young and was diagnosed as a child, there's a good chance his asthma could go away by adulthood.

"Asthma in childhood gets better," he said. "It's not usually persistent. If you get it in adulthood, you probably have it for the rest of your life."

Asthma prevention

Dr. Prakash Patel offers the following advice to help avoid an asthma attack.

1. Get educated.

"Education is first in prevention," the doctor said. "We try and educate the patient and the patient's family about how to prevent the trigger factors."

2. Take charge.

"We put the patient in charge of their care," Patel said. "We teach them how to avoid symptoms and triggers."

3. Monitor symptoms.

"There's a small device you blow in that tells you the peak flow of air, how much air you can exhale," Patel explained. "The patients do it when they are healthy. They keep the device at home, and then when they aren't feeling well, they can test then and see the levels."

4. Don't smoke, anywhere.

"Smoking is very harmful for children and adults with asthma," Patel said. "If you smoke outside and then come in, you still bring the smoke in with you. That can trigger an attack. If you have a child prone to asthma, you don't need to smoke at all."

5. Avoid airborne pollens.

"Keep the windows shut and use central air," said Patel about how to keep pollen out of the house. "If kids are playing outside, change their clothes and make them shower as soon as they come in."

6. Put mold on hold.

"You might want to think about a dehumidifier," suggested the doctor. "Air and light are good at preventing mold, too."

7. House your dust somewhere else.

"House dust is another factor in asthma," said Patel. "Vacuum the carpet frequently or keep bare floors if possible. Allergy-proof coatings are also good."