



# Asthma in the Classroom

The following information will provide an overview of key facts about asthma, and will outline helpful tips for managing students in the classroom with an asthma diagnosis. The following sections will discuss:

- *Ryan's Law, 2015*
- *Your Role as an Educator: Managing Asthma in the Classroom*
- Asthma Basics (what it is, symptoms, medications, triggers, etc.)
- Useful Resources

## New for 2018/2019

Windsor Essex County Health Unit provides [Ryan's Law: Asthma in the School E-Training](#) [1] for all school staff.

## *Ryan's Law* – Ensuring Asthma Friendly Schools

To create a safe learning environment which promotes student health, *Ryan's Law, 2015* addresses the right of every asthmatic student, with the permission of their parent or guardian, to carry their asthma medication with them at school (Note that for students 16 years of age or older, a parent or guardian's permission is not needed).

All school boards in Ontario are now required to have an up-to-date policy to address asthma in the school setting; *Ryan's Law* ensures that all schools will provide:

- Strategies to reduce risk of exposure to asthma triggers
- A communication plan for the dissemination of information on asthma
- Regular training on recognizing and managing asthma

A requirement that every school principal develop an individual plan for each pupil who has asthma, known as an *Asthma Action Plan*.

*Ryan's Law* and the Role of School Board Employees:

- With consent of the student, parent, or guardian, employees of a school board may be preauthorized to administer medication or supervise a student while taking medication in response to an asthma exacerbation (attack).
- If a school employee has reason to believe that a student is experiencing an asthma exacerbation, the employee may administer asthma medication, even if there is no preauthorization to do so.

# Your Role as an Educator

Students spend a large portion of their day under teacher supervision; therefore it is important for all teachers to be aware of their role in helping to manage asthma in the classroom and school environment.

Communicating with the school's principal and administrative staff is necessary to identify any students with an asthma diagnosis. All school boards have a policy in place which requires the principal to keep an up-to-date file on each asthmatic student containing their medical information and treatment plans. This individualized *Asthma Action Plan* will outline the steps to take when a student's asthma is not under control and they need medical attention.

As an educator in the school system, teachers now have the right to administer a student's asthma medication if the student is experiencing an asthma attack, even if there's no preauthorization to do so. Secondly, the parent or guardian must ensure the information in the student's *Asthma Action Plan* is kept up to date with their medications, known triggers, and recent attacks.

## For Physical Educators

*It's important to note that if a student's asthma is well-controlled, exercise is safe and participation in regular physical activity is recommended for health benefits.* Physical education teachers should be prepared to adapt activities for students with asthma and allow them to stop participating if their asthma is bothering them.

During exercise, we tend to breathe through our mouths, taking in more air which may be cold or dry, triggering asthma symptoms. It is recommended that teachers instruct students to warm up slowly, cool down gradually, and make sure the student's reliever medication is close by.

## Asthma 101

Asthma is a chronic disease in which the airways can become inflamed, making it difficult to breathe. Symptoms can vary from mild to severe, may flare up when the student is exposed to certain triggers, and can vary from one attack to the next.

Asthma can be diagnosed at any age, but is most commonly diagnosed during childhood. Approximately 13% of Canadian children are living with asthma (The Lung Association, 2014).

### Common symptoms of asthma include:

- Shortness of breath
- Weakness when exercising
- Frequent coughing
- Tightness in the chest
- Wheezing or whistling in the chest
- Wheezing or coughing after exercise

### Controlling Asthma in the Classroom

To manage asthma, a student may have two forms of medications: a preventer and a reliever. These medications are most commonly found as an inhaler, which delivers the medication directly to the lungs.

- *Preventers* are used every day, even if symptoms are not occurring. They help prevent swelling and mucus build-up, and with regular long-term use will help minimize symptoms.
- *Relievers* are used only when needed, such as before exercising, if breathing becomes difficult, or during an asthma attack. This medication quickly relaxes the bands of muscle around the airway to reduce symptoms on the spot.

## Asthma Attacks at School

During an asthma attack, the muscles around the bronchi tubes tighten, causing the airway to become narrower. Also, mucus is produced which blocks airflow. Triggers can cause these reactions immediately or can be delayed for up to a few hours. For this reason, it's important for the student to always have their reliever medication with them.

If a student experiences an asthma attack, keep them calm. Follow the steps laid out in their individualized *Asthma Action Plan* and ensure they stay in an upright, seated position to help airflow and the delivery of reliever medication to their lungs. If there's no improvement, have them continue taking the reliever medication as prescribed and call 9-1-1.

## Asthma Triggers

It's important to be aware of known triggers for students. There are two categories of triggers: allergen and irritants. *Allergens* only affect people who are allergic to them while irritants can affect anyone. Common allergens are dust mites, pet fur or dander, and pollen. *Irritants* can consist of strongly scented products, tobacco smoke, and cold, dry air or hot, humid air.

Many triggers can easily be found in classrooms. Teachers can help educate students with asthma about their known triggers and remove or minimize them from the classroom. For example, avoid keeping a class pet which has hair or fur, on high pollen count days keep windows closed, and request that other students refrain from using heavily scented products. Teachers should keep triggers in mind when planning field trips or outdoor activities, as well. By minimizing the exposure to triggers, teachers can help prevent an attack.

If you require more information, please speak to your school's principal.

## For more information

Please visit the following websites, and search for "asthma":

- [Windsor-Essex Catholic District](#) [2]
- [OPHEA](#) [3]

## Related Content:

[Asthma](#) [4]   [Educators](#) [5]   [School Health](#) [6]

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[1] <https://learn.wechu.org/>

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[3] <http://www.ophea.net>

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