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Alternative Therapies May Leave Asthmatics Gasping, Study Suggests

Approximately 13 percent of parents turn to alternative therapies to treat their children's asthma, according to a new study from the Université de Montréal. The findings, published recently in the Canadian Respiratory Journal, suggest that this trend is associated with a two-fold higher rate of poor asthma control in children.

"Previous studies have shown that close to 60 percent of parents believe that complementary and alternative medicines are helpful," says senior author Francine M. Ducharme, a Université de Montréal professor and pediatrician and researcher at the Sainte-Justine University Hospital Research Center. "Yet, well designed studies have failed to show any evidence that therapies such as acupuncture, homeopathy, chiropractic medicine or herbal therapy are effective in asthma. Parents may not be aware of the risk associated with the use of alternative medicine, including adverse reactions, possible interactions with conventional asthma therapy, as well as delay in taking, and compliance with, effective asthma therapy. Our findings confirm that children using complimentary or alternative medicine are twice as likely to have poor asthma control that those that don't".

More than 2000 children assessed

Questionnaires were completed by more than 2000 families who came to the Asthma Centre at the Montreal Children's Hospital for an initial visit. Parents were asked if they used any form of alternative medicine to help alleviate their children's asthma and to specify which type. Health information, patient demographics, asthma severity and control were then compiled.

The findings showed that over eight years, the use of alternative therapy remained stable around 13 percent, a five-fold lower rate than in the United States. There was a relationship between alternative and complementary medicine use, and pre-school age, Asian ethnicity, episodic asthma, and poor asthma control. The most commonly

reported alternative therapies included supplemental vitamins, homeopathy and acupuncture.

"Most of the children receiving these therapies were younger than six," says Ducharme. "This is particularly troublesome, given that there is no evidence that these therapies are effective and preschool aged children suffer more asthma flare-ups requiring an emergency department visit than all other age groups. Our study may serve as a reminder to parents that alternative and complementary medicine has not been proven effective in asthma and that it may interfere with effective conventional therapy: they should first discuss its use with their physicians. It should also serve as reminder to health care professionals to inquire about alternative therapy use, particularly if asthma is not well controlled, and initiate appropriate counselling."

About asthma

The diagnosis of asthma, which is a chronic inflammatory disease of the lungs, has been significantly on the rise over the last few decades. In 2009 asthma caused approximately 250,000 deaths globally. However, with proper treatment, including the administration of inhaled bronchodilators and corticosteroids, all children can lead a normal life.

Symptoms include cough, wheezing, chest tightness, and shortness of breath. These symptoms are also reduce by avoiding triggers, such as allergens and irritants.

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