Asthma Attacks Can Be More Deadly for Black Children

March 29, 2012

In the wake of the Trayvon Martin shooting, many folks have noted the alarming rates of gun violence deaths for black children. But compared with white children, African-American youth are at greater risk of dying from asthma too. Here are the facts: African-American children have a 500 percent higher death rate from asthma compared with white children, according to statistics compiled by U.S Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Minority Health and reported by Time.

Asthma attacks are triggered when inflammation and the narrowing of small airways causes shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing, chest pain and tightness. For some, asthma episodes are triggered by cigarette smoke, exercise, infections and allergens—allergy-causing substances such as pollen, dust or animal dander. Scientists know a great deal about asthma, but they're still trying to understand the full scope of how and why asthma develops.

One thing that's clear to researchers, however, is that African-American and Puerto Rican children have significantly higher asthma prevalence rates than non-Hispanic white children. In addition to racial and ethnic disparities in asthma death rates, the number of other negative health outcomes, such as emergency room visits and hospitalizations, are almost 250 percent higher for black children when compared with white children.

What could be causing the asthma disparities? Researchers suggested pollution as one possible reason. For example, most African Americans (68 percent) live within 30 miles of a coal-fired power plant—the distance within which health problems can result from power plant emissions. "The simple act of inhaling polluted air affects the immune system's ability to do its job," said Kari Nadeau, MD, PhD, a physician at Stanford University School of Medicine who has investigated the effects of air pollution on children. According to Nadeau, air pollution can cause genetic changes in kids' immune cells.

But even though fighting for better air pollution controls may be one way to eliminate these asthma-related health and mortality disparities, it's important that parents recognize asthma symptoms and consult a physician about best treatments for the condition.

In addition, parents can also read up on how food allergies can affect kids' health. Click here to learn more about how children may be sensitive to allergy-causing foods such as peanuts, milk and eggs.

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