

Asthma Community Network – Conversations for Advancing Action Podcast Series

Episode Transcript

Episode 5 – Environmental Triggers: A Medical Perspective

Narrator: Welcome to “Asthma Community Network – Conversations for Advancing Action” –a podcast series from AsthmaCommunityNetwork.org - an online Network designed for people committed to improving asthma outcomes in their community. This podcast series is designed to share best practices for reducing the impact of asthma through delivery of comprehensive, community-based care, especially in underserved communities. In these podcasts you’ll learn about strategies for managing effective program delivery systems, addressing environmental triggers, and leveraging community assets through partnerships.

Today’s guest, Dr. Jay Portnoy, the Director of the Center for Environmental Health at Children’s Mercy in Kansas City, Missouri, shares his perspective on environmental triggers and asthma management.

Dr. Jay Portnoy: You always hear “you are what you eat”, well, you are what you breathe also.

I think the environment is critical.

We have patients who have severe disease.

Usually they’re referred to us because they haven’t responded to normal treatments, medications, allergy shots, and things that are typically given to patients.

They usually come in with bags full of medicines, they show them to us, “I’ve been taking all of this stuff and it’s still not working”.

Usually they are sent to us to try to get some kind of exotic treatment, more advanced medicines or other medical management, but instead we take a different approach. We start asking them about their environment.

Narrator: Americans spend up to 90 percent of their time indoors. Indoor allergens and irritants play a significant role in triggering asthma attacks.

Identifying and limiting exposure to environmental triggers is an important step in managing asthma.

Dr. Portnoy explains:

Dr. Jay Portnoy: We’ve had a number of cases where patients who were refractory to treatment just had environmental triggers that were making their asthma so hard to control that they couldn’t respond to the medications.

When our team goes and identifies those issues and remediates them, we’ve seen dramatic improvements in health. We’ve had patients who’ve stopped going to the emergency room, stopped

going to the hospital, and we’ve had a decrease, in some cases, even totally discontinue their medications. So over all this is a very powerful treatment and intervention that needs to be integrated into standard healthcare.

Narrator: Doctors at the Center for Environmental Health at Children’s Mercy can engage environmental health specialists who perform home walkthroughs and then report back their findings to the doctor.

Dr. Jay Portnoy: Our environmental health specialists are experts at visual walk-throughs. They’ll do a quick analysis of various environmental gases for indoor air quality. And they’ll look for simple things that could be fixed. Caulking, mold contamination, elevated relative humidity, evidence of leaks. Things of that nature that are common but are often overlooked by home owners because they are just not aware of what things can cause problems in their environment.

Narrator: Dr. Portnoy notes there are many benefits to this method.

Dr. Jay Portnoy: By doing this we’ve been able to demonstrate significant improvements in health for many of our patients, we’ve been able to demonstrate utilization, decreased costs, reduced needs for medications, and most important, improvements in quality of life and satisfaction of our patients. So all around, good outcomes, but it does require a comprehensive approach with a variety of different resources.

Narrator: When asked about the role doctors can play in helping ensure medical care addresses environmental triggers, Dr. Portnoy describes the need for doctors to proactively integrate environmental trigger assessment and management into health care.

Dr. Jay Portnoy: I can order lots of tests that are very expensive, I can order cat-scans, I can order blood tests, I can admit somebody to the intensive care unit.

But the thing that I can’t do, that I really need to do, is to be able to order an environmental assessment to find out why my patient is sick and what to do about it.

If I did that I could stop having to prescribe expensive medications that are just treating the underlying symptoms but not the real cause of the problem.

So what I would like to see physicians be able to do, is to order environmental assessments the same way they would order any other type of test or treatment.

And that’s going to require a change in the way we think about healthcare delivery. Our health plans are going to need to consider the possibility of paying for environmental assessments, possibly even interventions, because otherwise they’re just going to be treating the symptoms they’re not going to be treating the underlying root cause of the problem.

Narrator: Dr. Portnoy is thankful and hopeful about the future of environmental trigger management.

He sees his work as a harbinger of things to come.

Dr. Jay Portnoy: I do want to thank our hospital here in Kansas City. Children’s Mercy has been very supportive of environmental health.

Most children’s hospitals don’t have programs like this. My assumption is some day in the future, all children’s hospitals will because it makes good sense. It’s preventative. It helps people to be healthy and it prevents people from having illness that’s caused by these outside things, environmental exposures. So I think that at some point, rather than be the exception, it will be the rule.

And I’m glad to have played some small part in making that come about.

Narrator: For additional information about environmental triggers and to hear more podcasts in this series, visit asthmacommunitynetwork.org/podcasts.

And for more information on asthma management, go to AsthmaCommunityNetwork.org – an online Network for people committed to improving asthma outcomes in their community.