

Noisy Asthma,

This sometimes “silent” disease could be triggering your child’s asthma

BY JAN GAMBINO, M.ED.

When I was pregnant with Rebecca, I prayed over and over for her to be healthy. Well, Rebecca was perfectly healthy for the first 17 days of her life: she slept 6 consecutive hours on her first night home from the hospital, nursed like a champ and tolerated her 3- and 5-year-old sisters’ attempts to take her to the playground in a doll stroller.

I thought that raising two children would have given me all of the training I needed to care for my third child, but I was terribly wrong.

Medical Merry-Go-Round

Although I had already received “on the job” training for dealing with ear infections and runny noses, Rebecca had much more worrisome and more serious symptoms than her sisters ever did. As an infant, Rebecca started wheezing and coughing. It was common for her to get blue around her lips when I nursed her. One illness followed another with hardly a break. With all of these problems, it was a constant struggle to keep Rebecca breathing.

We became “frequent fliers” at the doctor’s office and the emergency

Silent Reflux

Symptoms of Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Pain: during/after eating, throat pain, chest pain, fussy/irritable

Digestive: vomiting, wet/sour burps, hiccups, sensation of food coming into throat

Eating: picky eating, eating only small amount at each meal, little interest in food, poor weight gain, coughing/choking/throat clearing during or after a meal

Respiratory: coughing, choking, wheezing, hoarse voice, stuffy nose, frequent sinus and respiratory infections

Sleep: poor sleep, night coughing

Other: apnea (pauses in breathing), ear infections, tooth enamel erosion, bad breath

room. We redecorated our house with medical equipment such as a nebulizer and an oxygen tank. A whole kitchen cabinet had to be devoted to Rebecca's medical supplies and medications. I longed for a day without a doctor's appointment and for a night of restful sleep. I wondered why she wasn't getting better.

Rebecca was diagnosed with asthma at age one. During her toddler years, the wheezing and coughing continued and her asthma was labeled "severe." Rebecca was carefully monitored and received cutting-edge medical care. I meticulously followed her homecare plan night and day – nebulizer treatments, an inhaler with a holding chamber, and oral medication. Despite all of our efforts, she struggled to breathe through her asthma symptoms and lost weight

because she refused to eat. It really made me question my parenting abilities because I felt partially responsible for the lack of success in quieting Rebecca's symptoms.

Finally: A Breakthrough

I knew the doctors were just as desperate as I was to find out what was driving all of the coughing and wheezing. They began to explore other reasons for her symptoms. Rebecca was tested for allergies, cystic fibrosis and immune deficiency.

We had a major breakthrough when her pulmonologist suggested

that her symptoms might be signs of gastroesophageal reflux. Gastroesophageal reflux is when stomach contents and acid backwash into your esophagus (swallowing tube). Almost everyone has occasional run-ins with reflux, most often felt as "heartburn." But for some people, reflux is frequent or severe enough to cause significant health problems and be considered a disease – gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

Hide-and-Seek Symptoms

I was skeptical at first. I knew babies could have reflux that causes crying and frequent spit up. I also knew many adults with gastroesophageal reflux who complained of chest pain and burning in their throats or stomachs. Rebecca didn't seem to fit these profiles. She was an unstoppable whirl of motion and giggles. But we found out that her symptoms did fit the profile for GERD.

Chronic Cough and Throat

Clearing: Rebecca's doctor explained that although it's common for infants to spit up during reflux episodes, children and adults are more likely to have pain and discomfort from the sensation of food coming into the esophagus and throat. Sometimes referred to as "silent reflux,"

acidic food contents irritate the sensitive lining of the esophagus and throat. If the acid attempts to enter the lungs, it can cause coughing,



wheezing and throat clearing. Rebecca's junky cough, hoarseness and throat clearing were among the clues that she had GERD.

Upper Respiratory Problems: Talk to any mom and you'll likely hear stories about battling respiratory and ear infections during a child's younger years. But they're not just a childhood rite of passage – reflux could actually be the culprit, as doctors finally found in Rebecca's case. The sphincter muscle that normally keeps food in the stomach was opening and allowing food to come up into Rebecca's esophagus, sinuses and ear canal, causing irritation, infection and a ruptured ear drum.



Have nebulizer, will travel. Rebecca's nebulizer traveled to Disney World and on numerous camping trips, family holidays and cross-country excursions.

Treating Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease (GERD)

Diet: Patients with GERD should eat small, frequent meals; avoid eating before lying down or exercising; and avoid

- Spicy foods
- Acidic foods such as tomatoes or citrus products
- High fat and fried foods (because they take longer to digest)
- Carbonated beverages and caffeine

Food allergies and lactose intolerance are both associated with acid reflux, too. Babies with GERD may need to be burped more frequently or require a special formula and diet.

Medication: Patients can find a variety of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medications for acid reflux. Although it may be tempting to self-medicate, you'll get better results by consulting a doctor and following a comprehensive treatment plan. Ask the doctor to review prescription and OTC medications you're currently taking – including asthma medications and antibiotics – to check for ones that could aggravate reflux or cause stomach upset.

Positioning: Elevate the head of your or your child's bed to keep reflux to a minimum at night. (A pillow wedge can help you do this.) Avoid wearing tight clothing, especially after a meal.

Other things to consider as part of your GERD treatment plan are to avoid secondhand smoke (which increases reflux episodes) and lose weight if you are overweight or obese.

Sleepless Nights: Problems sleeping are typical of gastroesophageal reflux disease. The sphincter muscle naturally relaxes during sleep. At the same time, the person is swallowing less. (Swallowing is a great way to clear the acid and push it back down into the stomach.) When stomach acid starts creeping up the esophagus, the resulting chest pain and cough make it hard to sleep. No wonder Rebecca and I were constantly watching videos at 3 am! Elevating the head of the bed and eliminating meals or snacks right before bedtime may help reduce night waking due to reflux episodes.

Picky Palates: Poor eating and slow weight gain are also characteristic of acid reflux. Rebecca was a famously picky eater. She nursed well but refused to eat baby food. She would sit happily in the high chair at every meal but skillfully clamp her mouth shut when any kind of food was presented. Picky eating, food aversion, delayed feeding skills as well as trouble with textures and oral motor skills (suck, swallow and chew) are common for children with GERD.

Prescription for Reflux: Many of the medications used to treat asthma

(oral and inhaled corticosteroids) relax the sphincter muscles and may actually increase reflux symptoms. Medications used to treat upper respiratory and ear infections (antibiotics and over-the-counter pain medications) can also irritate the esophagus and stomach, adding to the pain of reflux symptoms.

The Asthma or the Egg?

Many symptoms of GERD – including coughing, wheezing, stuffy nose, frequent sinus and respiratory infections, trouble sleeping and night coughing – mimic asthma and allergy symptoms. Did asthma symptoms and medications increase GERD problems? Or did the reflux cause coughing and trigger asthma symptoms? Even researchers don't completely understand what comes first. However, it is clear that the vast majority of people with asthma also have reflux, with estimates as high as 75 percent in an adult study.

Rebecca's wet burps and coughing until she vomited could have been caused by asthma, but they could have been caused by too much acid sloshing around in her esophagus, too.

The Home Stretch

Out of desperation, I consented to give Rebecca short-term treatment with a reflux medication. The changes were dramatic. To my delight, Rebecca's appetite increased and she had less throat clearing and coughing after meals. Over time, treatment for acid reflux helped get her asthma under control, too. Best of all, she needed less asthma medication.

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Rebecca at age 10, with her GERD and asthma well controlled.

Raising a child with a chronic illness can be daunting. Despite the fact that I considered myself a calm, thoughtful person and an educated medical consumer, there were times when I was completely overwhelmed. For instance, when Rebecca was hospitalized, there were doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, dieticians and many others we relied on to diagnose and treat her, administer medications and monitor progress. When she was discharged, we left the hospital with pages of homecare instructions, medical equipment and a large bag of medications. Now I had to do the

same things for her on my own, all while running a household and caring for preschoolers. Eventually I did find support through a patient organization for pediatric reflux.

In the end, my prayers were answered. Rebecca's early struggles with asthma and gastroesophageal reflux disease are over. We found a treatment plan for both diseases that works. Now we have the upper hand

and Rebecca can blend in with the other kids at school. And she is one of the happiest kids you will ever meet.

Jan Gambino, M.Ed., is Associate Director of the Pediatric/Adolescent Gastroesophageal Reflux Association and the mother of 3 girls ages 17, 14 and 11 years. She has a Master's degree in Early Childhood Special Education and has been on the staff of PAGER Association since 2001. She is currently writing a book on pediatric acid reflux with PAGER Director Beth Anderson.

For more information on pediatric gastroesophageal reflux disease, contact:

Pediatric/Adolescent Gastroesophageal Reflux Association (PAGER Association)
P.O. Box 486
Buckeystown, MD 21717
Phone: 301.601.9541
(Message Center)
E-mail: gergroup@aol.com
Web site: www.reflux.org

PAGER Association is a nonprofit patient support organization for children (infants to teens) with acid reflux and their families. The organization's Web site offers educational information, publications and parent forums.