



THE POTENTIAL RISKS OF NOT TREATING ASTHMA

by Dr. Mary Noseworthy, Pediatric Respiriologist, Alberta Children's Hospital

Asthma is a chronic lung condition that causes swelling in your airways, making breathing difficult and often results in coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath or tightness in your chest.

The families we meet are often concerned about the potential side effects of inhaled corticosteroids to treat asthma, but it is equally important to understand the risks of not treating asthma. In Canada, 50% of children with asthma do not have good control of their asthma and families often do not realize how this affects their child's quality of life.

Children who have regular asthma symptoms (cough, wheeze, shortness of breath, chest tightness) and do not use an inhaled corticosteroid may have the following:

- **Overall reduced quality of life**
 - Poor sleep because of coughing in the night
 - Missing school/poorer grades
 - Unable to keep up with friends
- Delayed growth
- More emergency visits
- Hospital visits
- Long term damage to the lungs ("airway remodelling")

THE POTENTIAL SIDE EFFECTS OF CURRENT MEDICATIONS

There are two types of medication used to treat asthma – inhaled corticosteroids (controllers) and bronchodilators (relievers).

Controllers

Inhaled corticosteroids are the most important medication for treating and preventing swelling in the airways. When used regularly, controllers prevent flare-ups of asthma symptoms such as cough, wheeze, shortness of breath and chest tightness.

Since the medication is inhaled, some particles land in the mouth and throat and the potential local side effects of inhaled corticosteroids may include:

- Hoarse voice
- Oral yeast infection (thrush)

These side effects are not very common in children. Proper technique should prevent them. At usual prescribed doses, side effects on bones, growth and the immune system are very uncommon. The corticosteroids used to treat asthma are very different than the steroids some athletes use to build muscle mass that we hear about in the news.

Relievers

Bronchodilators give quick relief of symptoms by relaxing the muscles around the airways, but their effect is only temporary (about 4 hours).

The potential side effects of reliever medications may include:

- Shaky hands
- Faster heart rate

Most children value running and playing with their friends more than anything else in their lives. Parents, on the other hand, tell us they value their sleep, not missing work (or school) and not visiting the emergency department! These are equally important considerations. **Using inhaled corticosteroids to treat swelling in the airways of the lungs is the best way we know to ensure the short and long term quality of life for children and families.**

This material is designed for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction and/or treatment. If you have specific questions, please consult your doctor or appropriate healthcare professional.