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Our Mission

* Develop and institutionalize programs addressing the grave disparities in education, health, healthcare, and economic development faced by the African community.

* Defend the human and civil rights of African people.

Healthy Connections

MAY 2009

Asthma & African People

Asthma is a growing concern in this country, particularly in inner-city African and Latino populations.

Asthma is a chronic lung disease characterized by episodes of airflow obstruction. Symptoms of an asthma attack include coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath, and chest tightness.

A variety of "triggers" may initiate or worsen an asthma attack, including viral respiratory infections, exercise, and exposure to allergens or to airway irritants such as tobacco smoke and certain environmental pollutants.

The Impact of Asthma

Asthma affects nearly 15 million Americans, more than 5 percent of the U.S. population. In 1991, asthma claimed approximately 5,000 lives. After a decade of steady decline in the 1970s, the prevalence of asthma, hospitalizations for asthma, and mortality due to asthma each increased during the 1980s.

In 1993, among children and young adults, African Americans were three to four times more likely than whites to be hospitalized for asthma, and were four to six times more likely to die from asthma.

Poverty, substandard housing that results in increased exposure to certain

indoor allergens, lack of education, inadequate access to health care, and the failure to take appropriate medications may all contribute to the risk of having a severe asthma attack or of dying from asthma.

Asthma is the leading cause of school absenteeism due to chronic illness and is the second most important respiratory condition as a cause of home confinement for adults. Each year, asthma causes more than 18 million days of restricted activity, and millions of visits to physicians' offices and emergency rooms. A recent study found that children with asthma lose an extra 10 million school days each year; this problem is compounded by an estimated \$1 billion in lost productivity for their working parents.

National Asthma Studies

In 1991, to address the concerns about asthma in the inner city, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), a component of the National Institutes of Health, launched the first National Cooperative Inner-City Asthma Study. The primary aim of the study was to identify factors responsible for the rise in asthma among inner-city children and to test new strategies for asthma intervention.

Phase I was designed to identify factors associated with severity of asthma in children ages 4-11. The second phase studied the effectiveness of a

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Asthma and Africans *(Continued from front page)*

comprehensive program to develop improved knowledge about asthma, to promote better asthma self-management skills, and to eliminate or decrease exposure to environmental factors associated with increased death from asthma.

Asthma risk factors found to be present in these urban families studied included: high levels of indoor allergens, especially cockroach allergen; high levels of tobacco smoking among family members and caretakers; and high indoor levels of nitrogen dioxide, a respiratory irritant produced by inadequately vented stoves and heating appliances.

Many patients also reported difficulties in obtaining follow-up care for their asthma. Low

socioeconomic status and African-American race were independent risk factors for allergic sensitization to cockroach allergens. Thus, new approaches to reduce exposure to cockroach allergens may be very useful in controlling asthma.

Children in the intervention limb of the study had striking reductions in major symptoms, in school absenteeism, in hospitalizations, and in emergency room visits for asthma.

Studies on the Genetic Basis of Asthma

NHLBI and NIAID are now funding a cooperative study to explore the genetic basis of asthma — genes for asthma and for responsiveness to allergens.

This study has identified several candidate genes for asthma, some of which may be more common in African-American populations. In other studies, investigators have identified a genetic change in an immune-signaling molecule involved in asthma and allergic responses, that correlates with asthma severity.

This change appears to be several-fold more common among African Americans than among whites. Studies of genes should facilitate development of new and more potent and selective therapies, and may help to identify populations who might respond best to a particular drug.

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