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Why do so many kids get sick at back-to-school time?

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MICHAEL ZHANG

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

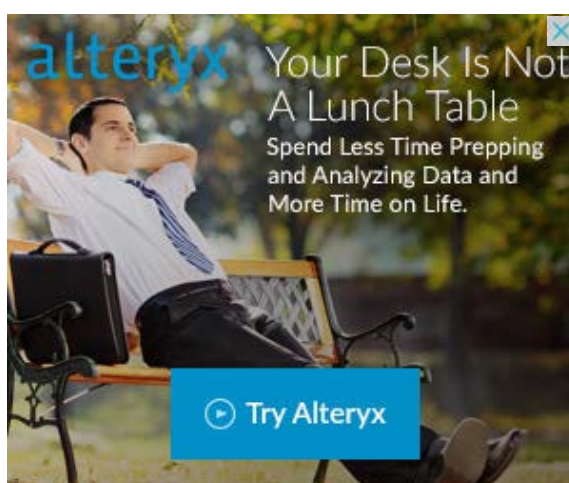
GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 26, 2017

Back to school? More like back to bed.

This stretch on the calendar can be a prime time for some little learners to fall ill as they flock back to the classroom.

Several types of respiratory viruses — think stuffy and runny noses and coughing — are common around this time of year, including ones that children and teens are more vulnerable to because they have not yet built the same immunity adults have, medical experts say.

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Most concerning is the tendency for asthma attacks to spike around back-to-school season, specialists say. Those attacks can come with serious symptoms that require emergency room visits, and they can be fatal if untreated.

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“It’s not unusual to see a two- or three-fold increase in emergency room visits in September and October related to asthma,” said Dr. Megan Sandel, a pediatrician at Boston Medical Center.



MIT study suggests how the flu resists treatment

If a team of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology has its way, the disease might not hit so hard in future winters.

What causes the back-to-school ailments?

Experts say different factors are believed to be at play.

Students are entering buildings they usually haven't been in for at least a few months, and the new environment can contain triggers — such as dust mites, mold, or chemicals — for asthma and allergies.

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The close contact of life in schools can also allow germs and viruses to spread more easily.

And back to school happens to coincide with a change in the seasons that can bring on maladies and allergy and asthma symptoms.

“People might notice that kids do tend to get sick around back to school time for a number of reasons, and it’s important for people to maintain good hygiene,” said Anjali Nath, director of [asthma prevention and control](#) at the Boston Public Health Commission.

Complicating things further: Some students forget to take required medicines or leave inhalers at home as their daily routine changes up during the transition back to the classroom.

For example, “kids with asthma in the summertime often feel better and it’s not unusual that, because they feel better, they stop the medicine and then come back to school and boom,” the symptoms return, said Sandel.

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Nath said that medical officials really “make an effort to get messages out [about ways to prevent and manage illnesses] around back-to-school time, particularly for asthma. Our goal is to keep students and children in school and healthy.”

Ian Branam, a spokesman for the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said several respiratory viruses are common around back-to-school time,

“

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particularly [enteroviruses](#). Symptoms of those can include a runny nose, sneezing, coughing, sore throat, and aches.

And, experts said, there is believed to be a connection between the flare-ups in asthma episodes and viruses around this time of year because exposure to viruses can trigger attacks or worsen symptoms for people with asthma.

“Some kids with asthma may be more susceptible when they’re exposed to the [common] cold,” for example, said Nath.

Experts said [steps](#) can be taken.

“Part of our job as doctors is when we do the back-to-school physical that we make sure children have their updated medication and make sure they have an [asthma action plan](#),” a document that [outlines](#) what medicines to take and when to take them, Sandel said.

They also recommend students avoid going to school when sick so they can recover and not infect classmates.

Hygiene is important, too. Children and adults should wash hands [properly](#) and not touch eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands. Cover coughs and sneezes, but not with hands; use a tissue or shirt sleeve instead. Avoid close contact with people who are sick. And keep frequently touched surfaces clean and disinfected, especially if someone is ill.

Other good health habits can also help, such as getting enough exercise and sleep, managing stress, and consuming recommended amounts of fluids and nutritious foods.

And now’s a good time to start preparing for another popular enemy of schoolchildren that’s right around the corner — [influenza](#).

The [flu](#) typically isn’t a major factor at the very beginning of the academic year, but flu season tends to start in October and November.

The CDC [recommends](#) people get a flu vaccine by the end of October.

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](#)

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