

Study: Dirty air drives asthma case hikes

By Rebecca Plevin, Vida en el Valle

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FRESNO -- A new study has found that across the San Joaquin Valley, emergency room visits for asthma -- especially among children -- increase with rising levels of air pollution.

Maybe the most alarming finding, though, is that asthmatic kids are more likely to have complications, and end up in the ER, even when air quality is rated 'moderate.' Their risk continues to increase as air pollution worsens.

"The lesson learned from this report is the moderate levels of air pollution have more health impacts than at least we realized before," Sarah Sharpe, environmental health program director for Fresno Metro Ministries, said during a media briefing last Tuesday.

The findings underscore the need to better educate the public about the health impacts of poor -- and even mediocre -- air quality, Sharpe said.

Valley residents should know, she said, that even when schools are flying a yellow flag -- meaning that, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Air Quality Index, the air quality is acceptable -- families with asthmatic children must take precautions.

Many Valley residents, she said, "haven't really heard how serious the health impacts are, and for us that's scary -- and now we are seeing the effects of that in our hospitals and our clinics."

The study -- which was conducted by the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at Fresno State, and funded by the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the California Wellness Foundation -- is considered the first local evidence of short-term health effects associated with rising levels of PM 2.5 and ozone.

The study authors analyzed air quality, and emergency room and hospital use for respiratory and cardiovascular conditions, in Fresno, Bakersfield and Modesto over an 18-month period. All three cities are ranked among the top 15 most polluted cities by ozone, short-term particle pollution, and year-round particle pollution by the American Lung Association's State of the Air report.

The researchers found that among kids, an estimated 1,596 additional asthma ER visits per year were associated with elevated PM 2.5 levels, and an estimated 217 additional asthma ER visits per year were associated with elevated ozone levels.

As PM 2.5 levels increased -- as they tend to do in the Valley during the winter -- kids' use of the ER for pneumonia also increased, and adults' use of the ER for asthma and acute bronchitis increased, according to the report.

David Lighthall, health science adviser for the air district, said the study validated the air district's on-going efforts to clean the air.

It "gives our board and staff reassurance to continue to make tough regulations to reduce exposure, particularly to fine particulates," he said. As an example, he cited the air district's tough winter wood burning law.

But Kevin Hamilton, deputy chief of programs at Clínica Sierra Vista, said the study demonstrated that the air district still has more work to do to improve air quality, and protect the health of vulnerable children and adults.

"As we can see from this study, we are far, far away from protecting our families and children from the impacts of air pollution," Hamilton said. "The so-called protective levels of air pollution that are considered the minimum for health risk are indeed not as protective as we have all been led to think."

For Patti Burton, a certified asthma educator at Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno, the study highlighted the need for children and adults with asthma to always take precautions, even on 'yellow' days.

"If your body is telling you something is not right, listen to your body," Burton said. "On those yellow days, you're breathing in garbage, and garbage is getting into your lungs, and it will effect your health."

