

# Do Asthma Medications Stunt Growth?



Dr. Judge

**I**t's true that the medications your child may take to relieve and control asthma can impede growth, says Dr. Dave Judge of the Allergy, Asthma & Sinus Center in Cary, "but that fact is only part of the information parents need."

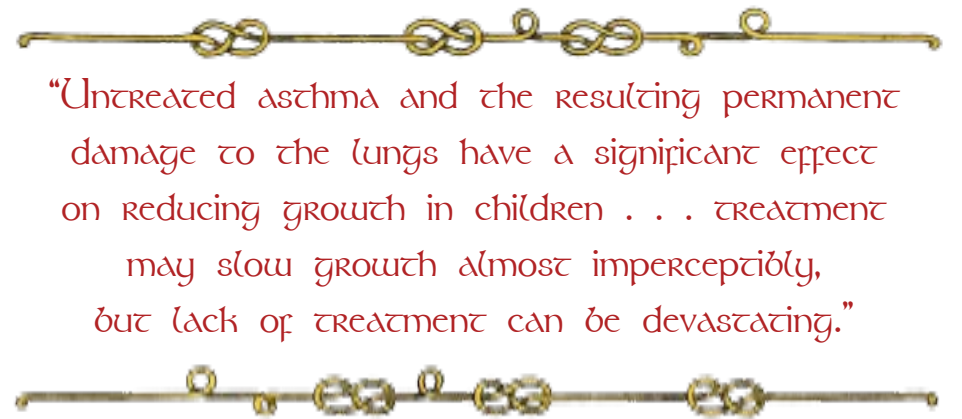
He is board-certified both as a pediatrician and allergist-immunologist, with offices in Cary, North Raleigh, and Wake Forest.

"We place a great emphasis on education in this practice," he notes, "because we know good compliance with healing practices is based to a large extent on good, factual information."

"Inhaled corticosteroids do *not* stop children from growing to their full height. Because, although studies have found that these same medications may slow the growth of children—by about one centimeter over the course of a year—that slowing of growth is eventually overcome."

"The more important fact is that untreated asthma and resulting permanent damage to the lungs have a significant effect of reducing growth in children. While treatment may slow growth almost imperceptibly, lack of treatment can be devastating."

At his Center, says Dr. Judge, "We use numbers to educate our patients and to guide the process. A patient comes to us for a lung function test and scores, let's say, 65 percent when ideally, for their age and gender, 100 percent would indicate healthy functioning lungs."



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"The test measures how quickly a patient's lungs move air in and out, and how much air they can inhale and exhale. The number is an important guide for us in the design of an appropriate treatment plan. Our goal is to reduce the frequency, severity, and length of asthma episodes. Because many different factors are involved in asthma, each treatment plan is individualized, combining medicines and asthma management in the way that works best for the patient."

The lung function test continues to be an important guide as the patient improves, he says. "Once we have the number in the normal range, and the patient is free of clinical symptoms, our goal shifts. We cut down on medication, and typically shift to inhaled steroids, which are proven to be quite safe. The corticosteroids used to control asthma are not the same as the illegal steroids used by some athletes to enhance performance."

Patients with asthma typically use inhalers to manage the disease, he explains. "Relievers are inhalers that are used when asthma symptoms occur. They contain medicines known as bronchodilators that work to widen the airways and quickly ease the symptoms. They can be short-acting or long-acting."

"Preventers, on the other hand, are for every-day use—even when the patient is free of symptoms—to help keep symptoms from occurring. These usually contain a steroid medicine that works to reduce the inflammation of the airways."

*Health&Healing: Are there alternative products that are known to be effective?*

**DR. JUDGE:** In my opinion, alternative medicines should never be substituted for traditional, scientifically proven medical treatments for asthma and allergies, unless they are subjected to the same rigorous scientific scrutiny that underlies the traditional medications we use.

*He&H: There continues to be a belief floating around that asthma is really a psychosomatic condition. How do you put that to rest?*

**DR. JUDGE:** That is clearly not true. We know that asthma is a chronic disease in the airways of the lungs, without a known cure. Some children outgrow their asthma; others do not. There is no evidence that asthma is an emotional problem. This myth seems to be based on the fact that certain actions, such as crying or laughing hard, can trigger an asthma attack. But the asthma already exists, and these actions are simply triggers for an episode.

*He&H: A fairly common belief is that there are specific breeds of dogs, such as Chihuahuas, that are far less likely to be a problem for people with asthma.*

**DR. JUDGE:** This belief exists because some dogs molt less than others. Dogs produce a protein that is a common precipitant of asthma attacks and this protein is contained in their "dander"—dead skin and hair—urine, and saliva. Certain breeds of dogs produce less dander and some people find that their symptoms are not so bad with these animals.

Even so, I advise my patients with pets to keep them out of sleeping areas, keep them off upholstered furniture and carpets if possible, and keep them outdoors as much as possible. People and pets often have powerful connections, and it's often not easy to keep them separate.

*He&H: We've talked before about the belief that people with asthma should refrain from active sports, and limit their exercise.*

**DR. JUDGE:** Many people with asthma find that exercise can trigger their asthma symptoms. This response to exercise is often called exercise-induced asthma (EIA). But asthma and sport can mix successfully. The key is management: maintaining good overall control of the disease. There is a very long list of people with asthma who have performed successfully at the highest level in their sports. Jackie Joyner-Kersey, who won six Olympic gold medals, is probably the best known of all—but many have performed in a variety of sports with great success.

Exercising in warmer, more humid air for shorter periods can mean fewer asthma attacks. Warming up before and warming down after exercise, and wearing a scarf loosely around your mouth in cold weather are also good practices.

*He&H: Finally, there are those who continue to believe that asthma, while prevalent, is not a particularly serious disease.*

**DR. JUDGE:** And of course we know that is not factual. About 20 million Americans have asthma that causes 5,000 deaths each year. The disease strikes nine million children under 18 and is responsible for 44 percent of hospitalizations in that age group. The incidence of asthma in childhood continues to increase at a rapid pace. Many believe that environmental issues may underlie these increases, in whole or in part. Asthma is at epidemic levels in this country, and it is a serious and sometimes fatal disease. **h&h**

**For more information about diagnostic and treatment options for allergies, asthma, and sinus conditions, contact:**

**ALLERGY, ASTHMA & SINUS CENTER, PA**

**Gurdev (Dave) Judge, MD  
Stacey Schiller Little, PA-C**

**CARY OFFICE**

**401 Keisler Drive, Suite 201**

**Cary, NC 27518**

**Telephone: (919) 859-5966**

**NORTH RALEIGH OFFICE**

**10931 Raven Ridge Road, Suite 111**

**Raleigh, NC 27614**

**Telephone: (919) 870-6440**

**WAKE FOREST OFFICE**

**1906 S. Main Street**

**Wake Forest, NC 27587**

**Telephone: (919) 562-7195**