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## Severe asthma moving into the Southland

(<http://www.southtownstar.com/news/941813,051208asthma.article>)

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Terri Triplett and her son Michael are at their wits' end.

Since moving to Richton Park from Chicago's Roseland community, 16-year-old Michael has developed severe asthma.

They've replaced carpet with wood floors and added air purifiers throughout their single-family house in hopes of reducing irritants. The Rich Central sophomore's condition has only worsened, though, and he's been hospitalized nine times in less than four years.

"It's difficult and stressful," Michael Triplett said of trying to cope with the respiratory disease that caused him to miss 47 school days last year alone. All he can do to control it is to keep up with a daily routine of medications - which range from a nebulizer to a hand-held inhaler.

What prompted Michael's severe attacks is unknown, but they're not uncommon, according to recently released research that found children in a handful of south suburbs have outpaced their Chicago peers, on average, in asthma-related hospitalizations.

Based on an analysis of Chicago and Cook County public health department data from 2004, the Chicago Reporter magazine found that the number of hospital stays for young asthmatic patients in Park Forest, Country Club Hills, Matteson, Steger and Chicago Heights are among the highest in all of Cook County.

Those towns trailed west suburban Stickney, though, where the rate of hospitalization was nearly twice high and any other Cook County suburb. Southland youth were still more likely to be hospitalized because of the lung disease than any ZIP code in Chicago, the Reporter analysis found.

It's not clear what is triggering the growing number of south suburban asthma-related emergencies, said family practitioner Dr. Michael Ward, who is affiliated with South Suburban Hospital.

There is, however, a likely a link between asthmatic children relocating from highly-afflicted, low-income Chicago communities to the suburbs, Ward said.

"From what I've seen those that are poorer don't get the treatment and are exposed to more allergens."

Dust, mold, exhaust, poor ventilation and pollution are some of the most common irritants that cause an inflammation of the lungs, inducing asthma attacks. For renters and low-income families, those factors can be difficult to control. So can grass, pollen and rag weed, which are prevalent in the suburbs, and can trigger attacks - particularly as former city kids begin hitting ball fields more frequently.

Deducing a reason for the emergency hospital treatments isn't simple, cautions allergist Dr. James Thompson, who is affiliated with Ingalls Memorial Hospital.

"I don't think there is one explanation," Thompson said.

A lack of both quality and preventative health care is likely a major factor.

"There's access to care in most communities," said Maureen Damitz, director of programs for the Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, which works to educate people about identifying lung ailments. "But access to quality care varies," she said.

Understanding why the number of suburban hospitalizations have outpaced those in the city requires more research, said Dr. Victoria Perky, a public health professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

But Ward said the prevalence isn't yet alarming.

"You just want to take action," he said. Parents "need to get educated on asthma and understand how to treat and control it."

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