



PARTNERSHIP  
FOR AMERICA'S  
ECONOMIC  
SUCCESS

# Why Business Leaders Should Care About Asthma



*Uncontrolled asthma is needlessly draining American businesses of billions of dollars each year.*

While society has long been paying for health care services—physician and hospital visits, medications—to treat asthma-related problems, a new study by the Partnership for America's Economic Success finds that **American businesses have actually borne the brunt of asthma costs**. That's because the majority of those costs—56 percent—are in lost work time.

So every time an employee loses a day of work due to an acute attack, or stays home to care for a child suffering from one, costs begin accumulating rapidly, with coworkers at multiple levels scrambling to take up the slack.

**These costs are avoidable, however.** In most cases, relatively simple and inexpensive interventions can control asthma. Indeed, the earlier that investments are made in treating asthma; educating people with asthma about ways to prevent attacks; and reducing environmental factors at home, school and work that trigger attacks; the greater the returns will be to American society, including businesses.

**Health background:** Asthma is one of the most serious chronic health conditions limiting U.S. productivity. It affects 8.5 percent of all children, with those who are African American (9.2 percent), poor (10.3 percent) and of Puerto Rican descent (14.5 percent) suffering disproportionately from its effects.

Percentage of costs due to lost work days, including days parents miss to care for children.

56%

Percentage of losses from medical costs.

44%

**Asthma:  
Who Pays  
the Costs?**

A study for the Partnership calculated that societal costs related to asthma will total \$7.2 billion over the lifetimes of Americans born in 2000. The researchers found that 56% of this amount—over \$4 billion—will be paid by businesses in the form of lost work days, including days employees miss to care for their children.

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| 27.35 | AmLower  | .66   | 4     | 41.34 | +23   | 44.54  | 27 |
| 29.53 | APlastic | .24   | 9     | 38.25 | +75   | 46.10  | 29 |
| 20.54 | AmelCap  | .66   | 2     | 23.24 | -36   | 23.65  | 20 |
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| 41.19 | Amething | .66   | 2     | 23.24 | -36   | 23.65  | 41 |
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| 13 | 71.99 |
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| 41 | 46.10 |
| 43 | 44.54 |
| 43 | 43.55 |

Asthmatic adults miss a full week more of work per year compared to their non-asthmatic peers. Those with uncontrolled asthma likely miss much more. Among children, asthma attacks cause more total missed school days per year—2 ½ on average—than almost any other childhood health condition. Children with severe cases can have significantly higher absenteeism, potentially creating a cascade of negative effects if they start falling behind.

Yet unlike many other childhood health problems, strategies to control asthma are well-known and extremely effective. A combination of medical treatments such as inhalers and environmental measures like reducing exposure to pollution, smoke and other “triggers” can significantly reduce attacks. Because asthma often begins very early—more than half of children with chronic asthma are diagnosed by age 3, and 80 percent by age 6—having a regular pediatrician from birth is critical. Not only do these measures save children from suffering, they save businesses and society substantial money.



## Preventing Attacks

**Regular pediatric care from birth**

There is no cure for asthma, but methods of control are well known, extremely effective and provide very favorable cost-benefit returns.

**Reduced exposure to triggers**



**Educate caregivers and kids**

## What does asthma cost?

Estimates of the costs of asthma to society range from \$12.7 billion to \$19.7 billion, annually, and between \$2 billion and \$3.2 billion just for children ages 0–18.

As staggering as they are, these estimates fail to adequately reflect the fact that, because asthma is a chronic disease, those costs accrue over a lifetime and increase into adulthood. This makes early preventive care a very smart investment.

Another promising measure is **“asthma coaching.”** In St. Louis, a pilot program provided coaches to 200 parents of young children on Medicaid to help them manage medications, doctors’ visits, and triggers like pests, and to change problem behaviors, such as smoking. Only 36 percent of coached kids were later hospitalized with asthma-related illnesses, compared to 59 percent of those with no coaches.\*

\* Strunk, Robert C. and Edwin B. Fisher, Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine, March 2009

## What should we do?

Asthma is not just a health issue, it is an economic one. States, cities, and the private sector all have a stake in establishing broad-scale preventive measures, such as:

- Ensuring that all kids have a pediatrician from birth.
- Providing health insurance that includes reliable coverage for preventive care.
- Educating people with asthma and their caregivers about identifying early signs of an attack and preventing them to avoid school and work losses.
- Continuing to research the most effective medical and environmental interventions—and the relationship between the two—so that best practices can be identified and prioritized.

This policy brief is part of a series documenting both the societal costs of adverse early childhood conditions and the short- and long-term economic benefits of public investments in young children. ■ This brief, written by Elaine Weiss, is based on research done for the Partnership by Drs. Angela Fertig and Phaedra Corso at the University of Georgia, Athens. The full report, including citations, is available at [www.PartnershipforSuccess.org](http://www.PartnershipforSuccess.org). The authors gratefully acknowledge comments by Stephen Rhody.

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### The Partnership for America’s Economic Success

was created by a group of business leaders, economists, advocates, and 13 funders to document the economic impacts to the nation of investments in children from before birth to age five. The Partnership is housed at and managed by the Pew Center on the States.