

Brooke, 13, is able to live an active lifestyle and also manage her asthma



Breathe Easier

Sugar Land Residents and
Medical Experts Share Tips
for Living with Asthma

*Written by Tonya Ellis
Photos by Nneka Kimble*



During her first attack, Brooke Boarman felt like she was being strangled. “I was in the middle of a tennis match, and it felt like a hand was around my throat, and it got tighter as I breathed.”

Boarman was having her first experience with asthma. Initially, she was shaken. “It was kind of scary when she couldn’t catch her breath,” says her mom, Stacy Boarman. “She was definitely fearful.”

After a visit to the family doctor, Boarman was diagnosed with exercise-induced asthma and given an inhaler. Four years later, the 13-year-old is as active and athletic as ever. “She is a competitive swimmer and she was also a competitive cheerleader,” says her mom.

What is Asthma?

Asthma is a chronic respiratory disease characterized by inflamed airways and a sensitivity to allergens. Victims may experience coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, or shortness of breath. Attacks may be mild, as was seen with Boarman, or life threatening. About 34 million Americans suffer with the condition and there are roughly 3,500 deaths due to asthma in the United States each year.

Signs to Watch For

Asthma symptoms are subtle. “The stereotypical TV version of a person stumbling around looking for their inhaler is not always the case,” says Dr. Joseph Perez of Allergy and Asthma Care of Houston on Southwest Freeway. “There’s a wide spectrum of symptoms,” adds Dr. Binita Mandal of Allergy and Asthma Associates. “Some will have severe shortness of breath, wheezing, and tightness in the chest that prompts the patient to go the ER. Others will have coughing with exercise or play.”

Constant throat-clearing and a chronic nighttime cough are also signs of the disease. Don’t try to treat these symptoms with cough syrup, warns Perez. See your doctor. “If you don’t control the problem, it’s going to make the child more likely to take trips to the ER,” he explains.

All in The Family

What causes asthma is not known, but there are various triggers for the disease. “We do know there seems to be some genetic tendency toward developing asthma,” states Perez. “If you have a relative that has asthma, you have a higher likelihood of developing it than other people.”

Brooke’s father, Scott Boarman, has asthma and suffered from it more as a child than he does now. Her 14-year-old sister, Ansley, does not have asthma. Brooke’s asthma comes only when she exercises. When she feels an attack coming on, she uses her inhaler. “I’ve only had five of them,” she says.

Other triggers for asthma include air pollution, food, plant, and pet allergies, obesity, exercise, eczema, and cigarette smoke. Children infected with respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) are more likely to get asthma, while breastfed babies are less likely to get the disease.

The blessing of Sugar Land’s mild weather can be a curse for asthma and allergy sufferers. “We have a higher incidence of mold, dust mites, and that sort of thing,” observes Perez. “From mid-January up until June, our office was completely inundated.”

Brooke Boarman had her first asthma attack when she was 9 years old



Sugar Land’s mild weather sometimes works against asthma and allergy sufferers



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Asthma Fast Facts

- About 34.1 million Americans have been diagnosed with asthma.
- Seventy percent of asthmatics also have allergies.
- Asthma accounts for 500,000 hospitalizations each year.
- Approximately 40% of children who have asthmatic parents will develop asthma.
- Asthma accounts for 217,000 emergency room visits and 10.5 million physician office visits every year.
- It is estimated that the number of people with asthma will grow by more than 100 million by 2025.

Source: American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology

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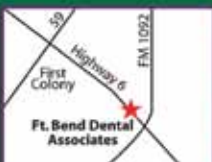
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What's the Cure?

While there's no cure for asthma, it can be managed. "It's a chronic disease, so while the symptoms may not be there, the inflammation in the lungs can be chronic and continue," says Mandal. "You never get rid of it completely, but your symptoms may improve."

Losing weight and increasing exercise can help for those with obesity induced asthma. Those with asthma brought on by allergens should try to avoid those triggers. If the asthmatic is allergic to pets, for example, it may be time to find the cat a new home, says Perez. "This can reduce the need for medication."

Those who need medication have the option of short term solutions, such as inhalers to be used during flare-ups, for mild cases, or daily medications, for more severe cases.

"The focus is on prevention," says Perez. "It's all about trying to prevent them from having flare-ups, or coughing daily, or being short winded daily."

Learning to manage and live with their daughter's asthma has helped the Boarman family breathe easy. "At first, it was a little nerve wracking, but now that a couple of years have gone by she has done a good job of self-management," says Stacy. **SLM**

TONYA ELLIS is a Sugar Land area resident, wife and mother of three.

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Is It Allergies?

Sometimes asthma and allergies go hand in hand. Approximately 70% of asthmatics also have allergies.

Here are symptoms to look for:

- * Frequent headaches, especially those located over the nose and/or forehead areas
- * Itchy/scratchy throat
- * Inability to sleep well
- * Ears that feel plugged up
- * Stuffy nose, with or without discharge
- * Inability to breathe through nose comfortably.