

Study demonstrates art therapy's effectiveness in pediatric asthma

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In the first randomized trial of art therapy for asthma, National Jewish Health researchers found that children with persistent asthma enjoyed decreased anxiety and increased quality of life after seven weekly art-therapy sessions.

It can be a terrifying experience when an [asthma](#) attack closes down a child's airways and makes the simple act of breathing a life-threatening struggle. The fear and anxiety associated with an [asthma attack](#) can last long after the attack has subsided. The research, published online May 1, 2010 in the *Journal of [Allergy & Clinical Immunology](#)*, reports that the art therapy showed benefits both during the therapy and for months afterward.

"Asthma impacts not only a child's physical well-being but also has a considerable effect on a child's quality of life and psychological development," said National Jewish Health Art Therapist Anya Beebe, MA. "Our study shows that art therapy for children with severe, chronic asthma is clearly beneficial. Our results were striking and persisted for months after treatment stopped."

In art therapy, patients create artwork that helps express their feelings about an illness, a trauma or medical concerns. The artwork can then serve as a starting point for discussions about these issues.

Researchers believe that creating art helps participants establish distance between themselves and their medical concerns. They learn to

understand that they have a personal identity outside of their illness. It is believed to be particularly effective with children because they often do not have the adult capabilities to verbally articulate their emotions, perceptions, or beliefs, and often can more comfortably convey ideas in ways other than talking.

In the study at National Jewish Health, 22 children, ages 7 to 14, with persistent asthma were randomized to either an active art-therapy group or a control group. The children in the art-therapy group received 60-minute art-therapy sessions once a week for 7 weeks. Art-therapy sessions were designed to encourage discussion, expression and problem-solving in response to the emotional burden of chronic illness. Children in the control group completed evaluations but did not participate in art therapy.

Those receiving art therapy show significant improvements in problem solving, communication, quality-of-life, anxiety and self-concept scores. At six months the active group maintained positive changes in [anxiety](#) and quality-of-life scores relative to those in the control group.

"Art therapy can be a valuable adjunct to the treatment of a child's physical illness," said senior author Bruce Bender, PhD, National Jewish Health Professor of Pediatrics.

Art therapy is an integral part of the Pediatric Day Program at National Jewish Health. In this unique program, patients and their families spend one to two weeks as outpatients with full days of evaluation, observation and therapy by a team of physician specialists, nurses, psychologists, nutritionists, and other health professionals. Team members gather regularly to share information, establish a diagnosis and develop a personalized treatment plan for each patient. They then teach patients and their families how to best manage both the physical disease and the psychological stresses that often accompany severe chronic diseases.

Provided by National Jewish Medical and Research Center

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