Taking the Time to Breathe

By Carrie Bates, RRT, AE-C

We rush to and fro, busy with children, spouses, chores, work, hobbies, taxes — and more. We are on autopilot keeping our schedules in check and checking off our To-Do’s, trying our best to get through each day. Why is it only a moment to really breathe when we’re in a good or bad moment? Faced with bad news we inhale sharply until our lungs seem like they can’t expand further and then exhale so long it seems we’ll faint. With good news, the inhale is not as sharp but we exhale as if we have no care in the world, head tilted slightly off center, eyes kind and bright as if we’re lying on the beach with warm sun on our cheeks. These are the moments that remind us that we’re alive. The moments that remind us to be in the moment and go off of autopilot and take in the world around us.

For almost 91,000 Montanans, being in the moment and taking the time to check their breathing has to be at the top of their priorities. These individuals have asthma, a chronic, life-long, sometimes life-threatening disease that makes it hard to get air in and out of the lungs, even if they are not having an attack. The exact cause of asthma is not known, but researchers think a mix of environmental and genetic factors often early in life play a significant role. Asthma can be controlled with regular outpatient care, self-management, and medication. A simple mnemonic, “ART”, can help remind people how to prevent future asthma attacks:

Avoid Asthma Triggers. Tobacco smoke, allergens, pets; cover your mouth if you’re headed into cold air; avoid strong odors and spray perfumes; warm up and cool down properly when exercising; and make sure you receive available vaccinations to avoid any illnesses.

Regularly Visit Your Doctor. Working with your doctor to create an asthma action plan is important. Your doctor can educate you on how to avoid common asthma triggers and teach you how to properly take any controller medication prescribed.

Take Your Asthma Medications. There are many medications available to help control asthma. Working with your doctor will help find the best one for you.

An exciting new program is now available at North Valley Hospital in Whitefish to help those individuals who come through our doors with a primary or secondary diagnosis of asthma. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), every year nearly 4,500 asthma-related hospitalizations occur throughout Montana. The highest rates occur with children aged 0-17 and seniors aged 65 and over. As a Registered Respiratory Therapist and manager of the Respiratory Therapy department at North Valley, it is my primary goal to make it easier for individuals to take an active role in their asthma treatment through increased education about their disease and how to manage it. Montana is a place for ideas, and to make those ideas work we need to collaborate together. Which is why, when I heard about an opportunity to work closely with the Department of Public Health and Human Services, Asthma Control Program to create a one of a kind asthma education plan, I jumped at the opportunity.

The program is a natural fit with North Valley Hospital’s Planetree philosophy of patient-centered care. Through coordination of several departments across the hospital, when an individual enters the facility and is identified with asthma or the potential for asthma, they receive personalized education on asthma causes, triggers, symptoms, and signs to recognize an oncoming attack. We also explain how specific changes in their home environment can decrease triggers, and develop a personalized home management care plan that includes ways to continue the conversation with your primary doctor. Our goal is to improve community knowledge about the disease, improve health outcomes for asthma patients who visit our hospital and ultimately reduce asthma-related readmissions for individuals over time. There are also initiatives in the works for outpatient educational programs and support groups, and taking the program to our primary care clinics.

Take a moment and go through a simple exercise with me. Wherever you are sitting, or standing, or leaning on a post waiting for your name to be called letting you know your coffee is ready to be enjoyed, lengthen your spine just a few inches taller and raise the top of your head to the sky. Close your mouth and inhale slowly through your nose until you feel as if your lungs cannot take in anymore of the fresh air. Exhale slowly through your nose until it seems you have exhausted every cell in your body with air. Look around at all of the beauty and wonder around you, and be grateful for all of the advancements right here in the Flathead Valley. There is much to breathe in.