

Summer camp helps asthma sufferers breathe easier

By DONNA KELL,
Herald Staff

When you're a child, and all your friends are going out to play - to run, to jump, to get breathless with activity - it's not easy being one of the over 500,000 Canadians with asthma.

But in Halton Hills and in the rest of Halton Region, The Halton Lung Association provides a summer camp for those kids with special needs. Camp organizers keep track of who is using their medication and determines when an activity reaches the point of being "enough" exercise.

Nine-year old Billy Harding from Burlington is no exception. Billy has asthma, an allergic condition that makes it difficult to breathe sometimes. The passages in his lungs get blocked up and he can begin to wheeze and gasp for air.

"I have to use an asthma puffer and all that," said Billy, a bright boy with blond hair, big eyes and a ready smile. He peeks out from his baseball cap to say "sometimes if I run too much I have trouble breathing."

Bill likes the camp. He doesn't feel abnormal, and he realizes that there are other children his age and slightly older and younger who have similar needs and similar dangers.

"It's different when you're around other kids with asthma, because some of them can't run a lot and others can. When you're in school everybody can run. Like...it's different here."

Billy said he likes camp because there are puffers everywhere. Puffers, are the medical treatments used to widen narrow air passages to allow the air to pass. The drug can relax the asthmatic person to the point where breathing becomes easier.

Camp councillors concentrate on the needs of the boys and girls, although not all the children are asthmatic; some of them are the brothers and sisters of those with asthma.

"They have an hour's worth of aerobics each day and that's to work on their breathing," said Stacey Hammett, a camp councillor and a university student who plans to enter the teaching profession. Ms. Hammett is joined by two other students at the asthma summer camp.

Other than the puffers that make an appearance each day, the Halton Lung Association camp "is just like any other camp," Ms. Hammett said.

Children in the camp travel to places like Kelso Park, Wildwater Kingdom, Fairy Lake and local provincial parks. They enjoy games and water sports. Swimming is particularly good exercise for asthmatics, according to the Ontario Lung Association.

The children have races and play capture the flag. They also have crayfish races, which Billy marvels over.

His favorite activity is playing in the creeks. "I like playing in the creek because we make boats out of popsicle sticks and we catch crayfish," he said.

Asthma is the result of family background, and is often accentuated by infection, pollens and house dust, pets, strenuous exercise, sudden climatic changes and tobacco smoke and smog.

The Lung Association of Ontario has called it "the most common chronic disease of childhood." One of every eight children in Canada gets asthma between the ages of three and six. It can then last until the child is eight to 10 years old.

One in twenty-five children may find the asthma lasting until age 10 or 12. Severe cases of asthma continue into adulthood.

The Canadian Lung Association says more than one million Canadians are affected by asthma. And reports of death from the disease are on the rise.

The Halton Lung Association has been running asthma camps for children for over 15 years in the Region.

For more information on asthma, or the summer camps, call the Halton Lung Association at 632-8499 in Burlington.



These happy campers with the Halton Lung Association are (back row left to right) Lisa Collura, Stacey Hammett and Anna Macky, and (front row) Billy Harding and Tara Behle. (Herald photo.)

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