

# It's Not Easy Breathing Green

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When my wife and I first started dating, I knew she had asthma, but I never gave it much thought – that is, until I was with her and she had an asthma attack. We went for a walk on a hot summer day and all of a sudden she stopped, turned a light shade of blue and stooped over, struggling to breathe. Thank God we were close to her house, so we were able to get inside with air conditioning and she was ok.

I, however, was totally freaked out. It's a horrifying, helpless feeling to watch someone you love not being able to breathe and there's nothing you can do about it. Even though she had a prescription inhaler, I immediately went out and bought a Primatene Mist inhaler that I put in my car's glove box (it's still there, even though I'm sure it expired a decade ago).

When our kids were born, they always seemed to have a hard time kicking colds, which always seemed to settle in their chests. Sure enough, they were both diagnosed with asthma. Thankfully, though, we've had only a few asthma attacks. But after my experience with my wife, to be safe, we got tons of inhalers and a nebulizer. As an overprotective parent, all I care about is never seeing my kids turn blue. The Food and Drug Administration, however, wants them to be green.

Starting on January 1, 2012, the FDA is banning the sale of over-the-counter asthma inhalers in favor of prescription-only alternatives. Over-the-counter inhalers traditionally contain chlorofluorocarbons, which are odorless, colorless and nontoxic chemicals that contain fluorine, chlorine, and carbon. They are used with inhalers as a propellant to move the medication, helping the user to breathe it in.

However, according to The National Library of Science at the National Institutes of Health, once released, CFCs enter the atmosphere where they deteriorate and release chemicals, destroying the Earth's ozone layer, which protects us from harmful ultraviolet rays. CFCs can last more than 100 years in the atmosphere.

The FDA implemented the ban in response to the United States entering into The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, an international agreement between 196 countries that is intended to phase-out chlorofluorocarbons. The ban on CFCs in inhalers comes over 15 years after the U.S. prohibited the use of the compounds in products like refrigerators, air conditioners and aerosols, which began in the 1930s.

Surprisingly, Primatene Mist, made by Armstrong Pharmaceutical Inc., is the only over-the-counter inhaler sold in the U.S. Other inhaler manufacturers have dropped CFCs in favor of hydrofluoroalkane, an environmentally-friendly propellant. Both varieties are effective at treating asthma symptoms, such as shortness of breath and chest tightness, but HFA inhalers are available only by prescription.

Dr. Badrul Chowdhury, director of the Division of Pulmonary, Allergy and Rheumatology Products in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, advised asthma sufferers that "if you rely on an over-the-counter inhaler to relieve your asthma symptoms, it is important that you contact a health care professional to talk about switching to a different medicine to treat your asthma."

Some asthma sufferers aren't breathing easy, however. Primatene Mist inhalers, which use epinephrine to treat symptoms, sell for about \$20, while prescription inhalers, which use the drug albuterol to combat breathing difficulties, can cost three times as much.

We're lucky that our kids have prescription inhalers, so they can be green while not turning blue.

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