

Pacheco: Our children need cleaner air

By Susan Pacheco

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Photo: Michael Paulsen, HC Staff

The Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas rank at No. 6 and No. 8, respectively, out of the 25 most ozone-polluted cities in the United States, according to the American Lung Association.

As a pediatrician practicing in Houston, I understand all too well how much our county's "F" grade for ozone in our air affects my young patients.

I recently testified at a public hearing in Arlington held by the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) about just how dangerous this poor air quality is for children. My 10-year-old patient with asthma, Alexander, came with me. He carries his asthma inhaler in his backpack at all times and is not allowed to play outdoors on bad-air days because he is at such high risk for severe asthma flare-ups. I brought him with me to show our elected officials here in Texas the toll that air pollution takes on children like Alexander.

I wish I could introduce him to those in Congress who are currently threatening to roll back ozone standards that would clean up the air in Texas and across the country. Maybe then they would understand just how damaging poor air quality is to children's health.

More than 40 years ago, Congress passed the [Clean Air Act](#), giving the Environmental Protection Agency the authority to regulate air pollution.

The EPA proposed new ozone standards under the Clean Air Act that lower the level of allowable ozone pollution. There has been an overwhelming amount of scientific data demonstrating that the current standard of 75 parts per billion does not sufficiently protect the U.S. population, especially children, who are more susceptible to air pollution because they spend more time outside, are more physically active and have faster rates of breathing than adults.

Unfortunately, more than 128.7 million people in the United States live in areas with unhealthy levels of ozone, according to new data from the [American Lung Association](#). This is why the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), American Lung Association and other leading health organizations are urging the EPA to

lower the level of allowable ozone pollution to 60 parts per billion. This threshold would reduce children's exposures of concern from ozone by 95 percent to 100 percent, helping to decrease the number of hospitalizations and premature deaths, asthma attacks and days missed at school.

The inherent vulnerability of children cannot be overstated: In addition to increased asthma exacerbations and emergency room visits, elevated ozone levels have a disproportionate effect in younger children with asthma and also affect children with other chronic lung diseases like cystic fibrosis.

The Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas rank at No. 6 and No. 8, respectively, out of the 25 most ozone-polluted cities in the United States, according to the American Lung Association. This ranking is especially alarming in the face of dramatic population growth expected in Texas by 2050. Children in our state have already been affected by ozone pollution as evidenced by increased cases of newly diagnosed asthma and the increased number of preterm births.

Until Alexander can breathe easier, I will continue speaking up at public hearings and in published forums to urge our government to support strong ozone standards to clean up the air and improve our children's health. In order to get the best possible start in life, children need clean air.

Pacheco is a Houston pediatrician.