

Q & A Treating Pediatric Pulmonary Hypertension

Contributing author, Usama Kanaan, M.D., Director, Pediatric Pulmonary Hypertension Program, and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Emory University School of Medicine

Q. There seems to be an increasing prevalence in pediatric pulmonary hypertension (PH). What are the current methods available for treatment of the disease?

A. Pulmonary hypertension can be treated a number of ways depending on the cause and the severity. If there is an underlying cause (e.g. lung disease, obstructive sleep apnea, etc.), the first step is trying to correct the cause. In the case of idiopathic pulmonary hypertension (also called primary pulmonary hypertension, when there is no identifiable cause), treatment can include oral medications, oxygen, inhaled medications, and, in severe cases, continuous IV medications.

Q. When should a physician refer patients to a pediatric pulmonary hypertension specialist?

A. Depending on the referring physician's comfort level with pulmonary hypertension, s/he may refer patients who are at risk of PH based on an underlying condition, are thought to possibly have symptoms related to PH, or have established PH.

Q. What services does the Pediatric Pulmonary Hypertension Program provide to patients?

A. The PH Program is a comprehensive, multidisciplinary program that provides in-hospital and outpatient care to patients with or at risk for pulmonary hypertension. It is comprised of five physicians (four pediatric cardiologists and a pediatric pulmonologist) with expertise in pulmonary hypertension, as well as a dedicated pediatric nurse practitioner. The team sees patients in consultation in the hospital setting and in its dedicated pulmonary hypertension clinic. While children with pulmonary hypertension have been cared for at Children's in the past, the program allows us to provide the most dedicated and focused care to children and families affected by this progressive and life-threatening disease.

Q. What is the long-term prognosis for patients with pediatric PH?

A. For patients with PH caused by another condition, PH can get better or even resolve. Idiopathic pulmonary hypertension is a progressive disease with no known cure. Outcomes in the current era in which we have multiple medications to treat PH are vastly better than just 15 years ago, but we still have a long way to go in the fight against this challenging disease.