Managing Asthma During the Winter Season

Asthma is a common respiratory disease that affects 17.5 million adults and 7.1 million children in the U.S. It causes your airways to become swollen and narrow, making it harder for you to get air out of your lungs. The lungs of asthmatics are also more sensitive to irritants such as perfume, cigarette smoke, cleaning products and even cold, dry air. Winter months may cause asthmatics to experience more frequent asthma symptoms such as wheezing, shortness of breath and chest tightness.

Your respiratory system is affected in several ways when you expose yourself to cold air. You have a layer of mucus in your airways called the “mucus blanket.” This “blanket” protects your airways and helps to move unwanted air particles out of your lungs. Cold air actually stimulates the production of more mucus; however the mucus becomes thicker and more difficult to expel because of the cold air. Increased thick mucus in your airways can make you more vulnerable to getting a respiratory infection.

Cold air can also promote increased nasal congestion causing you to breathe through your mouth rather than your nose. Normally when you breathe, your nose will humidify and warm the air before it gets to your lungs. Breathing through your mouth does not allow this to happen. When the cold air goes directly into your lungs, your lungs produce a substance called “histamine.” Histamine is responsible for the wheezing and shortness of breath that asthma suffers experience in the cold weather.

There are several things that you can do to help prevent an asthma attack from occurring during the winter months or when it is cold outside:

- Always carry your rescue inhaler with you in case of an emergency
- Be sure to take your prescribed asthma medications regularly-this can help to prevent increased inflammation in your lungs and minimize your symptoms
- Always cover your mouth with a scarf to prevent cold air from directly entering your lungs
- Drink plenty of fluids to keep the mucus in your lungs thin and easier to expel
- Try to avoid touching surfaces that can harbor germs-such as shopping carts, elevator buttons and handrails
- Avoid close contact in small spaces such as in a bus, subway or crowded elevator
- Get plenty of rest and eat a healthy diet-this will help to boost your immune system
- Get your influenza vaccine (unless you are allergic to eggs)
- Keep indoor allergens to a minimum
- Wash or bathe your pet regularly
- Vacuum your carpet and dust your furniture on a regular basis
- Wash your bedding weekly in hot water (>120 degrees) to kill the dust mites

Follow your doctors’ advice, take your asthma medications regularly and always carry your rescue inhaler with you! If you would like to schedule a clinic appointment, please call 412-648-6161. Have a safe and happy winter!

Division of Pulmonary, Allergy and Critical Care Medicine
We at the Asthma Institute recognize that many of our patients are coping with a range of issues in their lives that are frequently made more complicated by the presence of chronic illness. When asthma is difficult to control, critical health issues—both urgent and long-standing—can take a toll on patients’ emotional well being. The Asthma Institute wants to support patients’ psychological and physical needs.

We are thus very pleased to introduce Deborah Gillman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist who has recently joined the Division of Pulmonary, Allergy and Critical Care Medicine, who will be available to provide counseling services to our patients with asthma and related conditions.

Dr. Gillman received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from The City University of New York and completed her internship and post-doctoral fellowship training at the St. Luke’s Roosevelt Hospital Center, also in in New York City. She is a life-long New Yorker, but reports being thrilled with the people and pace of her newly adopted city of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Gillman has worked extensively in outpatient mental health settings conducting both individual and group psychotherapy. Her areas of specialization include the use of cognitive and behavioral strategies to promote positive life changes. Dr. Gillman will be available to consult with patients and their families:

- to address general emotional difficulties
- to develop new and/or improve coping skills to manage health-related concerns
- to identify strategies to improve overall self care and reduce stress

Dr. Gillman will begin holding office hours at the Comprehensive Lung Center in the Falk Building, 4th floor in the weeks to come. Please call the lung center at 412-648-6161 for more information about scheduling an appointment with Dr. Gillman.