Severe Asthma and Healthy Eating with
Guest facilitator Chef Sheila Brillhart, author of I'm So Hungry: A Healthy Cookbook for Asthmatics and Anyone on Prednisone & Corticosteroids

We were grateful last month to have Chef Sheila Brillhart on our call, to guide us in our discussion of healthy eating for people who are steroid dependent. Sheila herself has severe asthma. She began our call by describing a turning point when, during a hospitalization some years ago, she found herself consuming excessively large amounts of food. Her motivation was a combination of hunger but also the wish to treat herself as she recovered. She realized she was in a state of “Steroid Brain.” This experience, combined with her calling as chef and caterer, led her to write a cookbook targeted for asthmatics.

As she says on her website, www.sheilabrilart.com:

This cookbook will make it easier for you to satisfy your cravings with healthy, delicious foods. When you suffer with asthma or any other disease, there is no downside to eating healthfully and enjoying it.

Sheila noted, as well, that unlike hypertension, heart disease or diabetes, asthma is rarely discussed as an illness that requires special dietary considerations: “No one cared about all the food I was eating!” Her book is an attempt also to fill that gap.

Maintaining Motivation for Healthy Eating
Participants on the call related to the motivation to treat oneself in response to illness. Deborah Gillman, PhD, Psychologist with the UPMC Asthma Institute, noted that we all have a tendency, when we get off track from our healthy lifestyle—whether with diet or exercise—to feel guilty about our behavior, and then struggle with motivation to get back on track. It’s important to forgive yourself, and move on. Even if we indulge, we can re-group the next day (or even the next) and get back to healthy eating.

Participants shared their own experiences of steroid side effects: One participant described the “roller coaster” ride of helping her teenage daughter with asthma to eat healthfully. Another participant, on steroids for 5 years, struggles with bad
eating habits plus the inability to exercise as a result of her illness and medication side effects.

Sally Wenzel, MD, Director of the UPMC Asthma Institute, understands that many of her patients fear prednisone because of the resulting weight gain. Patients are emotionally devastated when she increases their doses, and many doctors don’t fully appreciate this. For Sheila, understanding exactly what steroids are doing for her is important to accepting the need to take them. It is important to remember, as well, that the side effects of prednisone include retention of water and elevated blood sugar, and so excessive weight gain and hunger are understandable. So when you find yourself feeling ‘so hungry’ remember that there are real reasons for this, and that overeating is not just a sign of poor self-control or indulgence.

I’m So Hungry—Help!
Sheila offered some ways to manage the hunger associated with high dose steroid use:

- Go for the most food with the fewest calories, so you want something that is both hearty and filling. Examples include smoothies, and soups.
- Drink a glass of water before a meal, to help you feel full.
- Chew gum after meals if you still feel hungry.
- If you crave crunch and feel you never get full, grab a handful of sugarless cereal.
- In a rush with no time to prepare a meal? Steamed frozen veggies are a good choice.

Sheila advises avoiding processed foods that tend to have excessive sodium (processed cheeses and pre-made sauces are frequent culprits), in favor of whole grain and low sodium food choices. She also promotes **clean cooking** techniques: Clean cooking is a concept that stresses cooking whole fresh foods with healthy techniques, like steaming broiling, baking and grilling, keeping fat, salt and sugar intake to a minimum. Clean cooking means seeking out foods that are unrefined, natural and have good fats, low calories and complex carbohydrates, cooked in the healthiest manner possible. She reminds us that ingredients are listed in order to weight, a clue to excessive fat or salt content.

**And don’t forget to move...**
Remember, also that even when one cannot exercise fully, Sheila challenged the group to think about something they can do, such as walking even a little, parking farther away than you need to. It’s easy to look at exercise as ‘all or nothing’, so try not to give up the chance to move!

I’m So Hungry is available through Lulu.com and Amazon.com, but Sheila offered our group some recipes to get on track.

**Berry Smoothie Ingredients:**
- ½-cup mango
- ½-cup blueberries
- ¼-cup strawberries
- ½ -cup mixed berry juice
- ¼ cup low fat vanilla yogurt
- 1 teaspoon chopped mint
- 1/4 -cup watermelon
- 4 each ice cubes

Blend all together in blender on high for 30 seconds

**BBQ Chicken Ranch Salad Ingredients:**
- Chicken breast strips, grilled chicken tenders, shrimp, salmon or tofu
- 3 oz of pre made BBQ Sauce
- 10 oz mixed baby greens
- ¼ cup roasted corn,
- ¾ avocado diced
- 1 tablespoon black olives
- 3 oz toasted pine nuts
- 3 oz diced tomato
- 2 oz chopped green onions
- 1/3 cup low fat shredded cheddar and Monterey jack cheese
- 2 oz light ranch dressing
- Salt and pepper to taste

**Directions:**
Toss all fresh salad ingredients together. Chill. Cook off chicken strips in oven or on grill toss in BBQ sauce. Set aside. Toss ranch in tossed salad mix top with warm chicken, pine nuts, cheese and green onions

The UPMC Asthma Institute Support Group is intended to provide support and information to the group’s participants. The professional guidance available through this group is not intended as a substitute for direct medical or psychological services.