February 2012: Asthma in the Winter

Participants in this month’s Asthma Institute Support Group called in to discuss the challenges of managing asthma during the winter months. Participants reported wheezing triggered by cold weather; increases in upper respiratory infections as a result of spending more time indoors; struggling with abrupt changes in temperature (from warm indoors to frigid outdoor temps). Several participants also struggle with social isolation during the winter months, fearing that exposure to large gatherings of people will put them at a higher risk for colds.

Avoiding cold viruses
Participants described their vigilance when it comes to avoiding—or trying to avoid—exposure to cold viruses. While one can work to keep their home as germ-free as possible, sanitizing high-traffic surfaces with disinfectant wipes (instead of sprays), it is sometimes harder to sensitize family and friends to the need for extra precautions. The presence of kids (one’s very own “Petri dishes”) in the home also increases exposure to viruses, a real challenge for severe asthmatics or anyone at greater risk for bad effects of respiratory infections.

Covering Up
We discussed the benefits of face masks to limit exposure to germs and viruses, although Sally Wenzel, Director of UPMC’s Asthma Institute, noted that masks can sometimes make it harder for asthmatics to breath. A scarf over the face in very cold outdoor weather can, however, be very helpful in keeping air warmer. For those who experience the sudden sensation of not being able to breath in very cold weather, Dr. Wenzel cautioned that this may be the result of one’s vocal cords closing, or Vocal Cord Dysfunction (see next month’s group topic for more on VCD), rather than one’s asthma.

Avoiding Seclusion in Winter
Participants in this month’s call described feeling secluded in their homes during winter, some hardly going out for months. We discussed the need to make careful choices and think creatively of ways to minimize risk but also reduce isolation:
• Gathering with a close friend or select friends who understand your needs can provide a much needed social experience.
• Instead of going to restaurants, have a small dinner party.
• Attend a daytime movie when crowds will be minimal.
• Staying in touch with friends via phone and Skype can help.
• Use home exercise equipment instead of exercising outdoors or at a gym.
• Choose wisely! One participant described choosing carefully among her children’s activities, avoiding pressure to attend everything but also trying not to always miss out.

As always, it’s important not to overdo it! Some participants rely on dietary supplements and prioritize healthy eating for health maintenance during winter.

The next meeting of the UPMC Asthma Institute Support Group will be March 19, 2012 at 6pm.