January 2012 Asthma Institute Support Group – Asthma and Exercise

A record 16 callers joined this month’s discussion on exercise—craved by some, dreaded by others, exercise can be a source of confusion and stress for folks with severe asthma. Deborah Gillman, PhD, Psychologist with the UPMC Asthma Institute, cited the motivation required by anyone to sustain an exercise regimen. One caller responded: “I need more air…not more motivation!”

Participants with adult-onset asthma described having to adjust to much lower impact activities—walking, stationary bike, yoga—in comparison with the skiing, hiking, dancing they used to do. This requires modification of expectations as well as activity. Callers described how hard it has been to accept new limitations, to not even be able to keep up a normal walking pace at times. For another participant who is asthmatic since childhood, exercise has always been a struggle: She recalled other kids making fun of her and states, “I had no opportunity to learn to like it… I never looked forward to it and I have to push myself to do it!”

“How do I know how much exercise is too much or too little?”
One participant, who has struggled at times to walk around the block, questioned how one even knows their exercise limits? Dr. Sally Wenzel, Director of the UPMC Asthma Institute, stated there is no one target heart rate, but she recommends: not pushing one’s self higher than 150, starting slow, keeping an exercise log, listening to your body to see if you return to your resting heart rate within 5 minutes. Persistent shortness of breath may be a sign you have pushed too far. She acknowledged that the strong wish of many severe asthmatics to feel normal can make it hard to feel OK about doing less.

Overcoming Obstacles
One caller reported that a trainer at her gym was fearful of her use of her inhaler. Another participant reported that her pulmonologist is fighting her insurance for coverage of Pulmonary Rehab visits. Dr. Wenzel noted that while asthmatics are not typically referred to Pulmonary Rehab (in comparison with other lung disease patients) since they do not typically suffer from lower oxygen levels during exacerbations, asthmatics can nevertheless benefit from having their heart monitored during exercise, and from the support of other patients/instructors and the formal introduction to mild-moderate exercises.

Winter weather is another exercise obstacle. The likelihood of contracting a viral infection increases in winter, and many asthmatics generally do worse in cold weather. This has forced one participant to do more at home, for example, using weights, instead of walking outside or attending a yoga class. Where does her motivation come from? “It makes me feel better when I do it.”
“Can asthmatics run marathons??”
Participants have heard in other online asthma forums of asthmatics running marathons. Dr. Wenzel did not hesitate to clarify that asthmatics who run marathons are NOT severe asthmatics. One caller has walked marathons, however, and described overcoming his own fears to do so. He acknowledged that not everyone would push themselves to the extent that he has, but urged others to find their own pace of exercise and keep to a regular routine.

**Exercise Induced Asthma**
Dr. Wenzel clarified that exercise-induced asthma is something generally experienced by *mild asthmatics*, as a result of smooth muscle constriction during exercise; lung function usually returns to normal within an hour. Those with moderate-severe asthma, in contrast, struggle with exercise because the activity is asking the body to work harder; the lungs have to try to keep up and often struggle to do so.

Many participants in this month’s call had some positive relationship to exercising, but that is not always the case. We acknowledged that some folks—asthmatic or not—hate exercising. The added challenges of exercising with asthma do not make it any easier for those who feel this way. Nevertheless, it remains an important part of anyone’s self care, and can be critically important for the health of someone with chronic illness. Below are some exercise tips shared among our participants:

**Tips for Exercising with Asthma**
- Start small—and don’t feel bad about not doing more!
- Set a routine, a fixed time of day and place.
- Get the gear you need.
- Use an exercise buddy if possible.
- Wearing pulse oximeter can help provide a measure of security. These are available online at relatively low cost.
- A Foot Peddler can be a good option to work out indoors and from a stationary position.
- Isometric exercises can be useful to combat steroid myopathy.
- Use positive self talk. How you talk to yourself about your progress can affect how you feel about it, and don’t forget to...
- Reward yourself (with something healthy!)