November 2011: Managing the Holiday Season and Chronic Illness

This month’s Asthma Institute Support Group addressed how to meet the challenges of the holiday season, with all the practical, personal, and emotional demands it makes, while also coping with chronic and severe health issues.

Participants expressed disappointment at not being able to celebrate as they might ideally want to. For some, travel to see family would be a hardship and so the decision has been made not to travel. For others, it means not cooking as much as one would like to or not having the strength to decorate for the holidays as one usually does. It may mean not attending as many social events as one’s family would expect. Others discussed how steroid medication contributes to increased irritability at just the time of year when one is spending more time with family and friends.

It is important to acknowledge feelings of guilt and sadness that may come with having to adjust plans or not live up to one’s own high standards for celebrating...We also discussed feeling the need to overcompensate for one’s limitations, perhaps by overspending on gifts or overdoing it in other ways. Participants generously encouraged each other NOT to neglect one’s own needs for the sake of others’ holiday pleasure. It may not be possible to live up to old family traditions – but it IS possible to come up with NEW TRADITIONS that will come to have equal value in the years to come.

If you can tell yourself that whatever you are able to do is GOOD ENOUGH, then it will be. “KEEP IT SIMPLE” was the theme!

Here are some suggestions from the group, to help folks have a happy and HEALTHY holiday:

TRAVEL: If you are travelling, planning ahead is key. Travel at less-crowded, off peak times. Ensure you have help on either end of your trip and, if possible, en route. Ask for help in particular if travelling with heavy medical equipment.

COOKING: It is often possible to buy excellent baked goods or prepared foods for ourselves and for guests! Try to relieve yourself of the pressure to be a super-baker or super-chef, in the interest of preserving your energy. If you are cooking, prepare large amounts and freeze some for later. Bake more of the same pie rather than four different kinds. If you can accept this, your loved ones and guests will too.

GIFT GIVING: Thankfully, people with health limitations now have the ability to avoid crowded stores. Some excellent suggestions include:

- Shop online!
- Give gift cards, which often come in their own attractive packaging. Even children can enjoy these.
• Don’t stress about gift wrapping: put gifts in gift bags instead.
• Shop consignment shops for items in good condition and avoid added financial stress that goes with holiday shopping.

**HOSTING:** Keep the guest list small. Host 2 couples instead of 10. Ask folks to bring certain dishes to avoid overburdening yourself.

**DECORATING:** Be selective. Choose the few decorations that have the greatest sentimental value and encourage yourself to be satisfied with these, rather than expending all your energy on decorating. This is an area where new traditions can be created—perhaps with other family members choosing their own special decorations.

In this time of year when emotions run high—even for the healthiest of us—it is important to be sensitive to increases in stress. If you are worn out, you will certainly miss out—more than if you do less, to reduce stress!