September 2011: Stress and Asthma

UPMC Asthma Institute Support Group met via conference call this month to discuss stress and asthma—including stress caused by living with asthma, and asthma exacerbations due to stress.

Life stress exacerbates asthma....
Participants familiar with their triggers for illness have noted that they can persevere through stressful life circumstances and stay quite healthy, only to find that flare-ups occur when the stress subsides. Nevertheless we discussed the need to be proactive when facing a high stress period of your life—by planning for extra help, pacing yourself.

...and asthma interferes with life!
Others described asthma as their primary source of stress: One participant cited the frequent need to cancel plans due to flare ups, and the stress of not being able to plan—or follow through with plans—and how that affects others around her. She keeps all plans tentative, which can be seen as both stressful but, perhaps, a necessary step at times.

Asthma as a Hidden Disability
Several participants described the problem of having an illness that is not visible to others: “I look healthy,” stated one participant, and this makes it harder for her family to accept her illness. As a result, she will push herself, sometimes to exhaustion, to the point that her asthma gets worse. It is very hard, as another participant said, even to simply take a rest and stay well rested; she overdoes it, she suspects, not wanting others to think she is lazy. Sally Wenzel, Director of UPMC’s Asthma Institute noted that many of her patients suffer from the problem of asthma as a “Hidden Disability.”

Two participants with adult-onset asthma described the adjustment from having been career-focused and highly productive in their work lives, to having to prioritize their own self care and asthma care since their diagnosis. This involved accepting their new limitations without feeling badly about them—an ongoing challenge—and also not pretending to others that everything is normal. Says Dr. Wenzel, “It’s a big step to say ‘My lungs are not normal!’ and a step that also requires that patients mourn the loss of the lifestyles they once had, of the pace they used to keep.

Steroids and Stress
Several participants discussed the stress of dealing with family members when one’s mood is affected by steroid use. Family members themselves can be on edge in the presence of a steroid user who is easily agitated, whose temperament is unpredictable. One participant described her own adolescence on steroids and how her and her family’s confusion about what were typical teenage mood and behavior changes versus steroid side effects. Families need to be helped to understand the side effects of
Steroid medication, and keep these in mind, but participants acknowledged that this is not always easy.

Accepting Help to Reduce Stress
Participants discussed being greatly helped by coming to accept their limitations and—importantly—accept help, whether help means using a handicap parking sticker, or utilizing special disability accommodations for students, or reducing one’s workload.

Alleviating Stress
Some stress-reduction strategies described by participants include:

- calling a friend
- journaling, as an outlet for stressful feelings
- relaxation exercises
- reading, losing yourself in a book
- listing to music
- daily inspirational readings
- watching T.V. or going to a movie—anything for laughter
- scrapbooking
- knitting/crocheting
- yoga
- massage therapy and reflexology treatments
- meditation

According to Deborah Gillman, Clinical Psychologist with the Institute, this list offers excellent stress-reducing strategies because many of these are free or cheap to try and can be done at many times or in many places. These strategies also engage our different senses in ways that can both soothe and distract us—soothing and distracting being good principles of stress reduction. We also discussed the importance of small, quick, stress relievers, to help prevent a buildup of stress.