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In Memoriam: AAFA-TX Board member Donald C. Fournier, MD of Texarkana passed away Feb. 10. He will be deeply missed.

**STRESS, ASTHMA AND RELAXATION BREATHING TECHNIQUES: IS THERE A CONNECTION?**

\* Fifty years ago stress was thought to be a “good” thing needed to enhance performance but we now know most *stress is harmful, a condition we experience when we feel that the demands made on us exceed our personal ability to cope – in other words, a feeling of being overwhelmed.*

\* Stress can take many forms - *internal*, from a physical illness; *external*, caused by pain, extreme heat or cold; *psychological*, caused by poor working or living conditions, financial strain or by difficult social and personal interactions.

\* Stress is a genetic, “fight-or-flight” response designed to save us from danger by releasing hormones that provide a burst of energy or adrenaline that protect us from a real danger - like dinosaurs. But this survival technique also has a **negative impact** for modern living where dinosaurs are scarce: if not controlled, **stress causes health problems** by *lowering our resistance* and making us prone to diseases and skin eruptions like hives.

\* **Stress** can also be a **major trigger for asthma exacerbations or flare-ups**. A chronic illness like asthma creates its own stress because of the constant medical, emotional, physical and financial disease pressures. **Stress and strong emotions can worsen asthma symptoms** in some people. The hormones released by the body during times of stress cause the muscles around air passages in the lungs to tighten, which narrows the air tubes, making it difficult to breathe. It is important that asthmatic patients learn to recognize stressful situations (an asthma exacerbation is definitely a stressful situation) and know when they need to relax and how to concentrate on slowing down their breathing in order to relax.

\* **Stress** also **makes many allergy related symptoms appear or worsen**. When we are under stress, allergy symptoms tend to pop-up; you can actually acquire more allergies during times of stress as your body's immune system goes into overdrive. *Dealing with stress levels is an important step towards controlling and preventing asthma and allergy symptoms*, as well as enjoying life a lot more! Learning how to stay calm and focused reduces stress and keeps many symptoms from developing. Change your thought patterns that produce your stress; identify what stresses you – if you can't change it, let it go; avoid situations or persons that trigger your stress; exercise to release stress; get plenty of sleep so you can deal with stress; delegate; practice relaxation exercises. The key to avoid stress-induced asthma symptoms is to learn basic relaxation breathing techniques and practice them BEFORE an asthma flare-up occurs and to know how to use these same techniques during an exacerbation to help reduce the affects of the symptoms.

**CONTROLLING STRESS WITH GOOD BREATHING TECHNIQUES HELPS CONTROL ASTHMA SYMPTOMS:**

\* Asthma symptoms or flare-ups rarely occur without warning. Most people experience some physical changes hours before symptoms appear. Watch for the signs that a flare-up is coming and then do these three things: 1) Use your quick relief or rescue medication right away if that's what the doctor prescribed. Follow your medicine plan. 2) Sit down and breathe slowly and try to relax. (The exercises that follow are good to practice BEFORE a flare occurs so they can be done when needed). 3) If the asthma flare-up gets worse, call the doctor and tell them which medicines and steps you've taken already. If it continues to get worse and the doctor isn't available, go to the nearest emergency center.

\* Learn these **breathing techniques** before they're needed in an emergency:

1) **Nose/Pursed Lip Breathing** a) breathe in through the nose with mouth closed (if nose is obstructed, use mouth) b) pucker lips to breathe out slowly on exhalation (like whistling) c) exhale twice as long as you inhale. d) repeat  
2) **Abdominal or Diaphragm Breathing** a) get comfortable, either sitting or lying down b) place one hand over your heart or chest, and the other over your belly button c) breathe in through the nose and try to make the lower hand go up (imagine you're filling a balloon). Don't let the upper hand on the chest move or rise d) breathe out with puckered lips and let the lower hand go down again. e) take 3 of these deep breathes, telling yourself to relax with each breath f) after you've mastered this technique, you can do it without placing hands on chest and belly button g) use this technique to relax several times a day - before meals, before exams, before going to sleep, before and during an asthma flare or whenever feeling tense or upset.

3) **Whole or Total Body Relaxation** a) Lie down or sit comfortably. Take 2 deep stomach breaths and breathe out through puckered lips b) relax all the muscles in your body, starting and focusing on the toes, then feet, ankles, calves, thighs, lower back, stomach, chest, upper back, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, jaw, face, head c) focus on each part of the body, allowing it to become heavy, warm and relaxed d) repeat in your mind while relaxing each muscle, “calm”, “quiet”, calm and quiet”, “warm, calm and quiet”. Imagine that you're an ice cream cone melting in the sun e) count slowly to 5 before you end the exercise As always, **ask your healthcare provider** if you're able to or should begin these exercises. For more information on stress and relaxation techniques, ask AAFA-TX.

**Upcoming Free AAFA-TX Programs:** 1) **Fri. Feb. 29**, 9 am-noon, “**Asthma Management & Education**” a CE program for nurses and respiratory therapists worth 3 contact hrs, Lake Highland HS, Richardson. 2) **Fri. Feb. 29**, 1-3 pm “**The Recognition & Treatment of Anaphylaxis**” a CE program for nurses worth 2 contact hours, Lake Highland HS, Richardson, Eric Schmitt, MD, instructor. Pre-registration required. 3) **NEW! Three Academic Scholarships** available for Texas students with asthma. **Application deadline: March 30, 2008**. For full details, criteria and application, please go to [www.aafatexas.org](http://www.aafatexas.org) 4) **April 17** “Asthma & Allergy Essentials for Childcare Providers” Better Beginnings Children's Ctr., Houston, Sarah Nelson, Instructor. For more information, contact AAFA-TX.

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