

New Hope for Those With Severe Asthma

The number of people living with asthma has nearly doubled over the past 40 years, according to the National Health Interview Survey. But thanks to recent scientific breakthroughs, a new procedure has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of life for people who have trouble controlling their asthma.

The procedure, bronchial thermoplasty, uses a tiny heating element to destroy some of the muscle tissue in the airway that contracts during an asthma attack. With less muscle to close the airway, attacks are less frequent and less severe. In fact, a recent study has shown that those who undergo bronchial thermoplasty experience an average of 32 percent fewer severe attacks; 84 percent fewer emergency room visits; and 66 percent less time away from work, school or other daily activities due to asthma symptoms.

“One woman we treated was on three or four different medications and was constantly being admitted to the hospital,” says Kevin M. Fussell, M.D., medical director, Pulmonary Care. “She’s now off her medications completely and only needs a rescue inhaler in case of emergency.”

He and Rafael Alba Yunen, M.D., offer the procedure at the Southeast Georgia Health System Brunswick Campus. Dr. Fussell stresses that the results will be different for everyone but that for many people, the procedure can be life-changing, especially when medications aren’t working.

Dr. Alba Yunen adds, “If, as results suggest, bronchial thermoplasty leads to fewer days of missed work and fewer emergency room visits by patients with severe

asthma, then it could help reduce the economic and health care burden of the disease. Although it is not a cure for severe asthma, it can render it more moderate and more manageable in select patients. For those severe patients, it can be transformative, allowing them to regain a sense of control over their once unpredictable lives.”

Though the airway may be temporarily irritated after the procedure, it is quick, painless and virtually risk-free. “We do three separate treatments, three weeks apart, to allow the airway time to heal in between,” Dr. Fussell says. “It’s a minimally invasive outpatient procedure, and each treatment only lasts about 30 minutes.

It is done under general anesthesia, so patients may feel the effects of the sedation for a few hours, but there have been almost no reports of pain, discomfort or other side effects.”



Rafael Alba Yunen, M.D., and Kevin M. Fussell, M.D., are board-certified pulmonary medicine physicians with Southeast Georgia Physician Associates—Pulmonary Medicine.

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Southeast Georgia Physician Associates—
Pulmonary Medicine
2500 Starling St., Suite 504
Brunswick, GA 31520

912-466-5504