Can asthmatics breathe easier?

By ACSH Staff — May 22, 2013

Even though a study conducted by Sally Wenzel, MD, and co-workers at the University of Pittsburgh had only 104 participants, the results seen during a clinical trial of a novel treatment for asthma are so impressive that they are still well worth noting.

The study evaluated the effectiveness of an experimental antibody drug called dupilumab, which acts by blocking the interleukin-4 (IL-4) receptor, which moderates allergic responses. No current asthma or allergy drugs function by this mechanism.

The efficacy of the drug was demonstrated by the dramatic clinical responses of the participants who were treated with the drug. During the 12-week trial period, 26 of the 104 patients had exacerbation of their asthma symptoms from the dupilumab group and 23 from the placebo group. This translates into a decrease of 87% exacerbation in patients treated with the drug.

ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom is very excited by these results. Even in 2013, there are no satisfactory treatments for asthma. The standard of care is inhalation of a combination of an anti-inflammatory steroid plus a long acting beta-agonist (LABA). Inhaled steroids, although safer than high-dose oral steroids still carry some of the same pharmacological risks, and the efficacy and safety of LABAs has been questioned recently.

He adds, Although the study was limited to a subset of asthmatics that would be most likely to respond to antibody therapy, and the numbers are small, this is still potentially a game changer for the millions of asthma sufferers with poorly-controlled disease.

ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross remains unconvinced, although hopeful: Such a small, brief study is a good way to generate interest in and funding for a larger, longer study to further support this approach to treating allergic-type asthma. Indeed, other types of atopy or allergy may also be susceptible to this approach but that remains to be shown.