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Facebook: a new trigger for asthma?

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Psychological stress is a recognised cause of asthma attacks.^{1, 2} In depressed asthmatic individuals, parasympathetic or sympathetic dysregulation, with a vagal prevalence, has been noted as a consequence of a stress-inducing situation.³

Facebook is a social networking website launched in February, 2004. It had more than 500 million active users in July, 2010,⁴ and is in some ways replacing real relationships, especially among adolescents and young adults. We present the case of an 18-year-old man for whom Facebook use seemed to trigger asthma exacerbations.

Asthma symptoms had been under control with inhaled corticosteroids (fluticasone 250 mg twice daily) and montelukast 10 mg once a day, which the patient took all year round except for the summer months, when exposure to house dust mite, to which he was sensitised, is usually low in Italy. However, symptoms had worsened in the months preceding presentation to us, and he had had to take relief medications several times, including in summer.

The worried mother learned that his girlfriend had broken up with him, leaving him in a depressive state. The girl had erased him from her list of Facebook friends, while “friending” many new young men. With a new nickname on Facebook, our patient succeeded in becoming her friend once again and finally in seeing her picture on her Facebook profile. The sight of this seemed to induce dyspnoea, which happened repeatedly on the patient accessing her profile.

The mother was advised to ask him to measure the peak expiratory flow before and after internet login and, indeed, “post-Facebook” values were reduced, with a variability of more than 20%. In collaboration with a psychiatrist, the patient resigned not to login to Facebook any longer and the asthma attacks stopped.

The temporal relation with onset of symptoms suggests that Facebook login was the trigger of asthma exacerbations, in which hyperventilation might play a key role.⁵ Other possible environmental and infectious factors were excluded with a thorough history and physical examination.

This case indicates that Facebook, and social networks in general, could be a new source of psychological stress, representing a triggering factor for exacerbations in depressed asthmatic individuals. Considering the high prevalence of asthma, especially among young people, we suggest that this type of trigger be considered in the assessment of asthma exacerbations.

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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