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Asthma doesn't stop professional skier

By Linda Zittleman Special to the Brush News-Tribune
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Jake Cohn came into this world practically having an asthma attack. He learned to walk attached to an oxygen tank. His first seven birthdays were spent in the hospital. He was on several steroid medications.

This is how severe asthma affected Jake's childhood. Fast forward to today. A helicopter drops him into fresh powder on an untouched mountain side. He skies down – free-style, cameras flashing. This is Jake Cohn today. Colorado's pride in the world of professional free style skiing. A 20-year-old man with severe asthma.

Jake, a Telluride native, is a great example of a person living an active, full life despite the challenges of severe asthma. However, until a few years ago, he was also an example of someone who did feel as good as they could have because of their asthma.

Growing up, Jake didn't think his asthma was very serious. He struggled to take his prescribed medications regularly. "I did everything I could to be a 'normal' kid", says Jake. "I didn't want to be the kid with asthma. I didn't want to be different." He relied heavily on his inhaler, which helps stop an attack once it has started. As Jake grew older, new medications became available to help prevent attacks from happening. These medicines, called controller medicines, are taken every day to prevent asthma attacks, even if the person is feeling fine. Jake would think, "Nothing is wrong with me. Why should I take this drug? Even when I felt my chest tighten up, I thought, 'I can deal with it.'"

Jake fell in love with skiing as a boy. Any disruption of severe asthma didn't limit his goals. Lucky for him, neither physical activity nor cold air triggers his asthma. Getting colds is his primary trigger.

Things changed for Jake in 2007. Recovering from a mild cold, an asthma attack put him in the hospital. His doctor ran a spirometry test, which measures lung function and helps diagnose asthma. The results showed that his lungs were functioning at 60 percent of capacity.

The striking results changed his mind about how he was managing his asthma. Today Jake feels better. He takes his medications religiously. He also uses a peak flow meter to help him monitor his breathing at home and predict when attacks may occur so that he can adjust his medications. And he continues to ski free style professionally all over the world.

Jake is teaming up with National Jewish Health and the High Plains Research Network to raise awareness about the Asthma Toolkits program in eastern rural Colorado. Asthma Toolkits is at local clinics all over rural eastern Colorado, including in Brush, Fort Morgan, Sterling, and Akron. Clinics have spirometers and free "toolkits" (in English and Spanish), which include a peak flow meter and written, useful information.

Jake's messages to kids with asthma: "Having asthma is not embarrassing. And there are more tools available now to help!"

For more information on Jake, go to jake-cohn.com. Linda Zittleman is the Associate Director for the High Plains Research Network.

This is the third in a series of articles for an asthma awareness project in eastern Colorado. The project is being done by the High Plains Research Community Advisory Council.



Telluride native Jake Cohn is able to pursue his passion for skiing after learning how to manage his asthma (Courtesy photo)

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