



THE NEEDIEST CASES

## A Mother and Her Girls Struggling to Overcome a Legacy of Ailing Lungs

By [JENNIFER 8. LEE](#)

Published: December 13, 2006

As a child in Ukraine, Mila Glucheva would fall asleep to the sound of her father's cough. It was a constant, deep, wretched cough. Every day. Hour after hour. It followed him like a shadow. Always, she could hear him.



Mila Glucheva, who suffers from asthma and diabetes, at home in Brooklyn with her daughter Eaness, 6, who has had bronchitis. Ms. Glucheva's other daughter, Jemila, 11, was recently found to have asthma.

Her father, a Soviet Army musician, had tuberculosis and emphysema. His lungs were decaying. They could all see it in the blood that came up.

The cough stretched on for years and years, through his daughter's childhood, until he died at 51. She was 15.

Her father is gone. But he left his family a legacy of bad lungs.

Ms. Glucheva found out that she had severe asthma shortly after she arrived in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, as an 18-year-old in February 1991.

To help her breathe, she takes prednisone for her asthma, uses a nebulizer, and wears a masklike device to bed for sleep apnea. Now she sometimes coughs up blood, as her father did.

The weak lungs have afflicted her daughters, too. Jemila, 11, was recently found to have asthma; Eaness, her impish 6-year-old who loves cats, has come down with bronchitis.

Ms. Glucheva's ailing lungs may have also triggered a dangerous downward health spiral. A few years ago, Ms. Glucheva, who was trim as a teenager and became somewhat plump after having children, started ballooning in weight. No one knows exactly why.

Though weight gain and increased appetite are known side effects of prednisone, which is converted by the liver into a steroid, doctors were baffled by the 45 pounds she gained in just two months this year. "They don't know what is going on with me," she said.

As she started gaining weight, she became diabetic. Her feet became swollen because of the additional weight they had to support. The diabetes led to rough patches on her hands. Her skin also developed a fungal growth.

Her asthma prevents her from moving around too much, leading to faster weight gain. So Ms. Glucheva, who is 5 feet 2 inches tall, has kept gaining, having gone from about 100 pounds when she first arrived in the United States to 300 pounds now.

To help raise her children, Ms. Glucheva once worked two jobs, as a manicurist and as a home attendant. But by 2000 she had left both jobs, and now, between the asthma and the diabetes, she is too disabled to work.

Compounding her problems, Ms. Glucheva said, her husband abandoned the family in 2004. She and her two girls survive mostly on disability income from the federal government.

She also has turned to the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty, a beneficiary agency of the [UJA-Federation of New York](#), one of seven agencies supported by The [New York Times Neediest Cases Fund](#).

The council helped her apply for the government support, as well as disability exemptions from rent increases for the family's Bensonhurst apartment, which is decorated with Chinese fans and delicate dolls.

It has also provided the family with food from a kosher food pantry and helped cover some of the medical costs to treat Ms. Glucheva's diabetes. And Neediest Cases provided \$500 to buy warm clothing for Jemila and Eaness.

Ms. Glucheva can barely leave the house now, just two or three times a week to go to doctors and to meet her daughters coming home on the school bus. Her weight gain has so alarmed her doctors that they have repeatedly told her she needs gastric bypass surgery, in which the stomach is reduced to roughly the size of a walnut.

"Every doctor tells me the same thing: I have to do it," she said. It's a loud cry from a large chorus: Her pulmonologist. Her podiatrist. Her thyroid doctor. Her generalist.

But she says cannot have the operation, because there would be no one to care for her daughters while she recovered.

And if something went wrong in the surgery, what then?

"If I was alone, no problem," Ms. Glucheva said. "But I have my kids, that is why I am afraid. Because you never know what is going to happen."