What Are the Risks of COPD and Pneumonia?

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COPD and Pneumonia: The Risk of Pneumonia In COPD

You most likely already know that chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is typically a mixture of two diseases: chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

- **Chronic bronchitis:** The bronchial tubes, which carry air to the lungs, become inflamed. This makes breathing difficult.
- **Emphysema:** The air sacs in the lungs that allow air to move throughout the lungs lose their elasticity, causing shortness of breath.

When the lungs are affected by COPD and are not working at their optimal level, your risk of pneumonia is increased.

COPD can be a difficult condition to manage. You know COPD is a chronic condition that can lead to pneumonia, but knowing how to prevent this complication can be helpful.

The Increased Risk of Pneumonia In COPD Patients

You have an increased risk of getting pneumonia if you have COPD. You also have an increased risk of respiratory failure associated with COPD exacerbations and pneumonia.

In 2002, a publication of the American Family Physician noted that 70 to 75 percent of COPD exacerbations are directly caused by a bacterial infection, such as streptococcus pneumonia and haemophilus influenza.

What Happens When You Have COPD and Pneumonia?

It can be difficult to differentiate between the symptoms of a COPD exacerbation and pneumonia as the symptoms can be similar.

Symptoms of a COPD exacerbation include a productive cough, shortness of breath, wheezing and chest tightness. Pneumonia can cause these symptoms plus fever, chills and shaking, and chest pain.

If you have COPD and pneumonia together, it is important to note that you may also have a difficult time speaking due to extreme shortness of breath, extremely high fever, mucus that is green, tan, or bloody, and COPD medications that have stopped working.

How to Avoid Pneumonia With COPD

Below are a few ways which may help you avoid getting pneumonia:

Stop Smoking

Most people who have COPD have it from smoking. However, research has shown that if you successfully quit smoking, this can slow the progression of COPD.

In addition, smoking also increases your risk of developing pneumonia. It actually damages the lungs' ability to remove bacteria.

Immunizations

Perhaps the best thing you can do to prevent getting pneumonia if you have COPD is getting the pneumococcal vaccine. It is also recommended to get the influenza vaccine yearly, as many people get pneumonia after having influenza.

Nutrition

A healthy diet can improve immune function, which can decrease your chances of getting pneumonia during a COPD exacerbation. Some key tips for adequate nutrition include:

- **Avoiding excess salt.** Excess salt can cause water retention, which can make your breathing more difficult.
- **Eat foods that are high in potassium, especially if you are prescribed a diuretic.** Potassium-rich foods include fruits such as bananas and oranges, tomatoes, potatoes and asparagus.
- **Watch your weight.** If you're underweight, this can cause your immunity to plummet. If you're overweight, this puts strain on your heart and lungs.

Hydration is also important. Consuming eight ounces of water per day can help to keep your mucus thin, which can make it easier to cough it out if you need to.

It is also important to know how your other beverages interact with your medications. For example, caffeine, alcohol and COPD may not interact well. If advised, it may be necessary to cut these beverages out completely.

However, alcohol may actually have a small benefit to you, if advised by your doctor. One alcoholic beverage with a meal may increase your appetite, which is beneficial if you have a light appetite and need to gain weight.

What to Do If You Get Pneumonia

If you do acquire pneumonia, here are some actionable steps to take:

Prevention

The best thing you can do is to prevent pneumonia in the first place. Good habits are key; these include the healthy habits we already discussed, such as a healthy diet and immunizations, plus taking medications as prescribed.

- **Controller inhaled medications:** these are taken on a daily basis, even when you are feeling well. The idea is that they build to a steady state in your body, preventing a COPD exacerbation from happening.
- **Rescue inhaled medications:** these are taken when symptoms occur and they should help within minutes. Ideally, you should not have to use your rescue medication more than a few times per week.

Seek Emergency Attention for Your COPD and Pneumonia

Antibiotics may be given prophylactically if you have an upper respiratory infection that is worsening. This may prevent the infection from developing into pneumonia.

However, if antibiotics are not helping and you have used your rescue medication without relief, if you've had to use your rescue medication at an increasing frequency, or if you have worsening symptoms – as we discussed earlier, it is time to seek emergency medical attention.

Early medical intervention for your COPD and pneumonia is important. If you choose to wait, a number of things can happen. Irreversible damage can occur to your lungs; this can cause your breathing to be even more labored after you heal from pneumonia. You could also go on to develop respiratory failure.

If you do not seek early medical attention or if your condition rapidly deteriorates, there is the possibility that you can develop acute respiratory failure and require intubation. This means that a tube is placed in your throat to assist with breathing while the pneumonia heals. This is important because it ensures your body gets the oxygen that it requires.