Following a COPD Diet for Symptom Management

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COPD Diet: Best Foods for Managing Your Condition

Eating the right foods can help you manage COPD and make breathing easier. Let's take a look at the kinds of foods you should be adding to your diet.

Best Foods for COPD

- Leafy greens (like spinach and kale).
- Berries (blueberries, strawberries).
- Whole grains (oats, brown rice).
- Nuts and seeds (almonds, flaxseeds).
- Fish (salmon, sardines).
- Beans and lentils.
- Eggs.
- Olive oil.
- Apples.
- Broccoli.

Understanding COPD

We've all heard the old adage, "you are what you eat."

Is this true? And does it apply to *everyone*, regardless of the disease?

I don't need to pull up research articles to point out the fact that eating a diet rich in fast food cheeseburgers and milkshakes equates poorer health, compared to a diet that is rich in lean meats, vegetables, and fruit. This is a commonly held belief, it is backed up by science, and we hear it *every time we go to our physicians' offices.*

But did you know that if you have COPD, being underweight can cause you to not live as long, compared to your overweight and obese counterparts who also have COPD?

Researchers call this the "obesity paradox" and "suggests an association between obesity and better outcomes for those with COPD." This doesn't mean that being obese makes having COPD easier, though – it just may

mean that the life expectancy is longer.

There are people with COPD on all ends of the weight spectrum – underweight, at a healthy weight, and overweight/obese. There are healthy eating guidelines in place that can be helpful for anyone with COPD, and specific guidelines for each of these groups of people.

The Importance of Good Nutrition

The food that we eat gives us energy. Energy is needed for all of the activities that we partake in on a daily basis – walking, playing with grandchildren, even breathing. Our bodies use food for energy using the oxygen we breathe, and carbon dioxide is produced, and then released.

The foods that we eat are comprised of carbohydrates, fats, and proteins. The nutrient makeup of the foods that we consume affects how much energy we will have, and thus, how much carbon dioxide is produced and released. Having too much carbon dioxide causes us to feel weak.

According to the Cleveland Clinic, “good nutrition helps the body fight infections. Chest infections are illnesses that often lead to hospitalization for people with COPD, so it is important to reduce your risk of infection by following a healthy diet.”

Nutrition and Weight

If you have COPD, it is important to maintain a healthy weight. This can be extremely difficult for multiple reasons.

For example, breathing with COPD sometimes requires up to 10 times the number of calories needed by someone without COPD, which can cause weight loss. On the flip side, people with COPD are often on medications that can cause weight gain, such as prednisone. Working with a registered dietitian (RD) regarding weight gain or weight loss is extremely beneficial.

The fundamental recommendation is that if you are overweight or obese, your heart and lungs must work harder. Losing weight can help because it will cause less stress to these organs. Losing weight can be done by limiting your calories and getting exercise.

As we’ve also discussed, being underweight can be detrimental to your health. It is important to consume enough calories to prevent wasting of the pulmonary muscles and the diaphragm – not doing so can cause worsening of breathing.

If you are at a healthy weight, monitor your weight weekly to ensure that you are not gaining or losing weight. If you are taking prednisone or a diuretic, such as Lasix, it is also important that you monitor your weight.

Food Choices for COPD

There is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to picking the right foods for COPD! As we’ve discussed, people come in many sizes, even if you have COPD! If you are overweight, your “magic” diet won’t be the same as someone who is underweight.

Regardless of your size, you want to eat to conserve energy. As we’ve discussed, COPD causes a large expenditure of calories due to breathing issues. Adopting certain habits is helpful.

For example, eating small, frequent meals can help to conserve energy. It can also help for other reasons – if you’re trying to cut calories, it may help you do so! Or if you’re trying to increase calories, you may be able to add more calories by eating more frequently – it can be tailored to your individual needs. Not only that, but you may be too tired to cook a large meal.

Eating a diet rich in protein can also help to conserve muscle mass. Examples include obvious choices, such as

lean meats, but also eggs, nuts, and Greek yogurt.

Increasing your water intake is also helpful! Why? According to the Lung Institute, “Improved water intake has been linked better sleep, reduced headaches, reduced phlegm, increased energy levels, and a general ease of breathing.”

What Foods Should You Reduce in Your Diet?

Foods with excess salt – this can lead to heart problems. Also, cut back on cruciferous vegetables such as broccoli and cauliflower.

What? Cut out vegetables?

As it turns out, these types of vegetables produce gas, which can contribute to shortness of breath. And while you’re at it, cut back on the soda – not only is it completely devoid of any nutritional value, but the carbonation can cause bloating, which can contribute to further shortness of breath.

The Bottom Line…

Improving your diet can help a lot! Consult an RD for specific guidelines – she can look at your comorbid conditions and help to create a meal plan that is right for you. However, having this baseline knowledge is a great place to start.