How to Enjoy the Holidays With COPD

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Holidays With COPD Can Still Be Stress-Free

As the busy winter season descends upon us, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) patients may find they are not feeling quite as festive as they would like — the holidays with COPD can be tough.

The stress of shopping responsibilities, social arrangements and keeping up traditions can take a toll on your mind and body, and before you know it, your excitement for the season has turned to worry about COPD exacerbations.

Although there is a lot to juggle over the holidays, do not let your life overwhelm your health. Instead, learn how to take full advantage of the joyous parts, avoid COPD triggers and maybe even improve your outlook and wellbeing for a fresh start to the new year.

Handling Holiday Stress With COPD

Stress is unavoidable over the holidays, but it also happens to be a major player in COPD exacerbations. If you let it get out of hand, you could find yourself too exhausted to carry on with your holiday obligations — or even wind up in the hospital.

The problem with stress is it causes an acute physical reaction in your lungs: when you begin to feel anxious or pressured, you will tend to breathe faster. The faster you breathe, the more pressure you put on your lungs to take in and expel air, and that can leave you feeling short of breath. Of course, the more difficult it is for you to breathe, the more anxious you become, and the cycle continues.

Stay in control of your holiday schedule and get a handle on stressful situations with relaxation techniques (meditation, visualization and simply resting your whole body) and a healthier routine. Get some exercise every day, but be careful not to overdo it.

Lastly, listen to your body and try not to be too hard on yourself — online shopping, curbing the indulgences, and opting out of hosting duties are great ways to cut back your to-do list.

Avoiding Breathing Problems

The holiday season brings lots of lovely smells and sensations, but some of these can be more harmful than they seem. If you suffer from COPD, take extra care to avoid common allergens and irritants in order to stay energized and keep exacerbations at bay.

- **Christmas trees.** For COPD patients, a real tree can be far more trouble than it is worth, so opt for an artificial and hypoallergenic alternative.
- **Wood fires.** Giving off many carcinogens and even more fine particulate pollution, a roaring fire is a

danger that is so often overlooked. Stay far away from wood-burning fires, especially if you are using supplementary oxygen.

- **Cold, dry air.** Changes in air temperature and pressure can bring on a COPD exacerbation quickly, so prepare properly before venturing out of the house. If you can, wear a scarf over your nose and mouth, which will store warmth and humidity to heat up the air as you breathe it in.
- **Dust.** If you are planning on dragging out the box of ornaments to decorate the house, unpack them outside where the ventilation is better. Wipe everything down with a cloth before setting it up, and remember to dust all these new surfaces periodically over the season to keep the air clean.
- **Artificial fragrance.** Strong fragrance can quickly irritate your airways, and while you should have no problem asking a smoker to take it outside, it is not quite as easy to ask someone to take off their perfume. If you are planning on attending a social event, it is in your best interest to mention your sensitivity beforehand, so the host can ensure a fragrance-free atmosphere.

Fun and Festivities Are Good for Your Health

There's more to the holidays than giving gifts and eating treats; the social atmosphere can help you out of a rut and steer your focus away from your COPD. In fact, attending some parties and gatherings can help you better manage your disease:

Elevate Your Mood and Relax

Your fatigue and feelings of vulnerability can lead you to hole up in your home, but it is important to fight that inclination. After all, depression is known to increase pain sensitivity and worsen other physical symptoms, while talking and celebrating can have the very opposite effect.

Studies show COPD patients who have social support — and make use of it regularly — not only have a better quality of life but may actually live longer than those who choose to isolate themselves.

Although group therapy and professional counseling are excellent additions to your COPD management plan, do not dismiss more casual opportunities to share your thoughts and enjoy the company of others over the holidays. Sometimes a bit of happy distraction can relieve some of the burdens of COPD.

Overcome the Stigma of COPD

Many COPD patients feel embarrassed about their symptoms and will avoid public spaces in order to avoid uncomfortable stares. But the holiday season is not the time to cower behind your illness.

It can take some time to build confidence, but accepting your illness without giving into it will send a clear message of self-assurance and independence.

Be the first one to bring up your condition if you notice that people look curious, and try to discuss your symptoms and state of health plainly and honestly. Once you can forgive yourself for anything you did or did not do to cause your COPD, you can begin to navigate any awkward or uncomfortable situation with grace.

Reach Out to Others

You need to devote time and effort to your self-care, but that does not mean you cannot offer love and support to others as well. The holidays can be a tough time for a lot of people. Stress, loss, financial issues and social or family hardships can hit hard, but there is a lot you can do to help out.

Whether it is a quiet, cozy afternoon with board games and conversation or a helping hand in the kitchen, offering your time and talents can make a big difference (and is both rewarding and empowering for you).

The holidays with COPD can be overwhelming, and that can make COPD symptoms much worse, so be sure to share your feelings with friends, family and a COPD support group.

This can be the year you learn to accept your illness, move into a more positive perspective and begin to realize your full potential.