Are COPD and Incontinence Connected?

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Could My COPD and Incontinence Be Related?

Since adequate exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide is necessary for every process within the body, every cell and system of the body is impacted by chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). As a result, incontinence — most often urinary, but sometimes bowel — may arise.

There are many factors that precipitate incontinence in people with COPD.

Weak Muscles

If you have COPD it is likely your muscles are weak, and this includes the bladder and anal sphincter muscles. These are circular types of muscle tissues that control the voluntary release of urine and stool. As a result of weakness, dribbling (especially of urine) may occur.

Stress Incontinence

Many people who have COPD are older adults. Many older adults, especially women, suffer from incontinence when they laugh, cough or sneeze. Having COPD does not make you immune to this type of incontinence, called stress incontinence — and with COPD, it is likely you cough frequently.

Stress incontinence may be treated with pelvic floor muscle exercises. Surgery or urinary catheter placement may be beneficial, and if you are overweight, losing weight may provide some relief.

Functional Incontinence

Speaking of stress, just getting up to use the bathroom may make you short of breath. You may try to “hold it” too long as a way to avoid becoming short of breath. This is especially common at night. As a result, you may wait too long before using the toilet and have some leakage en route.

Additionally, if you are on oxygen and suffer from fatigue, you are likely to need a few extra minutes to position oxygen tubing so you do not trip over it, and you need time to catch your breath before getting up. All these delays may result in a type of incontinence called functional incontinence.

Environmental changes may be helpful for this. Try making some simple modifications. Consider:

- Is your mobility impaired due to weakness?
- Would a bathroom schedule help you?
- Would you benefit from having a commode by your bedside?
- Do you wear clothing that facilitates movement, and is easy to pull up or down?
- Is your bedroom well-lit or do you move slowly due to darkness at night?

- If you are up at night frequently, do you need to drink the majority of your fluids early in the day?

Coffee and Diuretics

Many people who have COPD enjoy drinking coffee. Coffee contains natural compounds that serve as bronchodilators, opening up airways.

In fact, coffee is such a good bronchodilator that emergency personnel may recommend that a person having breathing difficulty drink a strong cup of the brew if emergency assistance is delayed and other remedies are not available.

In addition to its brochodilating properties, coffee has diuretic properties. Diuretics increase the production of urine and are a commonly prescribed medication for people who suffer from cardiopulmonary illnesses. Increased pressure within airways often leads to cardiac disease among people who are diagnosed with COPD, which may result in congestive heart failure.

The first line of treatment health care professionals prescribe to prevent and treat congestive heart failure is the use of diuretics, because ridding the body of excess liquid from saturated tissues makes breathing easier and decreases the energy needed for the heart and lungs to function.

If you take a diuretic, it is likely you need to make a trip to the bathroom quickly after taking your medication.

Medication, Anxiety and Alcoholic Beverages

Fluticasone is a medication commonly prescribed for people suffering from COPD. It opens up the air passages, but one of its side effects is that it increases the risk of urinary tract infections. If you have a urinary infection, you may have the urge to urinate every few minutes. You may suffer from burning and pain with urination, as well as episodes of incontinence.

Many COPD sufferers have increased difficulty breathing at night. When you cannot breathe you become anxious, and when you are anxious, you may need to void more frequently — this is called urge incontinence.

Anti-anxiety medications and medications that decrease the irritability of the bladder may be beneficial. Benefits must be compared with the risks of the medications, as many of the drugs cause drowsiness, which can also lead to episodes of incontinence.

COPD and alcohol are sometimes combined to promote relaxation and aid sleep. If this is the case with you, you may have to urinate more. If alcoholic beverages are consumed in excess, the likelihood of incontinence increases.

Getting Help

You may benefit from a consultation with an incontinence specialist. Incontinence specialists are health care workers, often nurses, who have received specialized training so they can help people who are incontinent. They have a vast amount of knowledge and tools available to help relieve incontinence.

Incontinence has many causes, so developing an individualized plan for treating it is the most effective way to minimize or eliminate incontinence.

There are many comfortable products to try while you work on getting your incontinence under control, including pads and protective underwear. Whatever you do, don't try to fix your incontinence by drinking less.

As someone who has thick secretions due to COPD, it is essential you drink lots of fluids. Unless your health care provider has told you to restrict your fluid intake for other reasons, most experts recommend adults with COPD consume at least three liters of fluids each day.

If you drink a lot, you are going to urinate frequently. Accidents sometimes happen, but wearing something like a pad or protective underwear makes them more manageable. It is critical that you do not let fear of incontinence impede your fluid intake, as hydration is very important so you can rid your body of sputum, breathe better, and prevent infection.

There are many causes of incontinence among people with COPD. Fortunately there are many solutions, and partial or full control of the bladder or bowel can be regained.

There is no need to be embarrassed if incontinence is a problem for you. Try some of the strategies suggested above. If they are ineffective, consult with your health care provider.