Do You Suffer From COPD Fatigue?

by ANGELA FINLAY

Find the Source of COPD Fatigue to Re-Energize Your Life

Many people shrug off fatigue a mild discomfort, but chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) patients know how serious it can become. One bout of exhaustion is an annoyance, but when you can hardly keep your eyes open or your body upright, your whole life will suffer in a big way.

Fatigue is a lack of physical energy or mental concentration, and it's the second biggest complaint among those living with COPD, next to breathlessness. Your level of fatigue will also influence your risk of hospitalization, which makes it particularly important to manage your energy loss.

Many things can bring on COPD fatigue, but there are many approaches to overcome it, too. Work with your doctor to find your weak spots, and then make some energizing adjustments to your lifestyle right away.

Where Does COPD Fatigue Come From?

COPD may manifest in the lungs and airways, but the consequences will spread throughout the body. Many of these "secondary" problems will drain your energy, leaving you tired and weary from morning to night.

- **Depression**: one of the most common (and most complicated) COPD side effects, depression, brings sedentary days and helpless feelings, which leave you feeling physically and emotionally exhausted.
- **Cachexia:** COPD can interfere with your natural metabolism, causing your muscle mass to deteriorate and your appetite to whither. This process is known as cachexia, and fatigue is one of its defining features.
- **Hypoxemia:** Taking in less oxygen with each breath can lead to hypoxemia, a low level of oxygen in the bloodstream. Low blood oxygen can leave you weak, short of breath, confused and tired, since the organs aren't receiving the nourishment they need to function at full force.
- **Malnutrition:** Many people with COPD have a difficult time eating enough, whether due to a loss of appetite or coughing fits that make it difficult to take in much food at once. Without the right nutrients, you'll have little energy.
- **Respiratory infections:** Infections in the lungs can wreak havoc on your system, and commonly lead to dangerous COPD exacerbations. A healthy respiratory system can usually kick the invasive virus within a week or so, but when your lungs are already compromised, all your body's energy will be funneled to fighting off the infection.

How Fatigue Affects People With COPD

Russell discusses what COPD fatigue feels like and how it affects those living with COPD.

Imagine driving a motor vehicle with the handbrake engaged.

For many COPD patients, this is what every day feels like, a constant battle to make any headway. Our lungs are damaged and our inability to function properly places a brake on all our other organs. As patients, we have to fight against this every day, and it's this fight which can cause severe fatigue.

On good days, we can go about our daily business, whatever this may be. On bad days, we are confined to our beds or couches. When we cannot get out day after day it can affect our mindset and eventually depression sets in. It is a vicious cycle we have to contend with, and there is no one strategy which will fix it.

If unmanaged, COPD fatigue can quickly exacerbate our symptoms and reduce the quality of life.

The inability to be mobile not only affects our mindset, but it also affects our muscles, our exercise tolerance which in turn makes us more breathless. Quickly things can get out of control and the longer we do nothing about it, the harder it becomes to our way out of the hole.

Before you know it, you've become irritable and feel isolated that you can't be bothered with visitors because you're so tired, it all just feels too hard. Sometimes visitors don't understand why you feel like you do and start to avoid coming over.

If you've reached this stage, life can be pretty miserable, and it's hard not to feel sorry for yourself.

Tips on How to Minimize COPD Fatigue

COPD will never let you rest as it is a disease which is always with you. What you can do is minimize the effect it has on you.

Fatigue is a symptom, and like any symptom, it needs to be managed. Managing your fatigue should be incorporated into your COPD action plan, but how you do this can be tricky.

Start with basic principles, find the cause and come up with a solution. For example, if hot, humid conditions make you fatigued, you need to minimize your exposure to the heat by finding ways to cool yourself down and by increasing your intake of water.

Do the daily chores around your home feel insurmountable? Is your home chaotic? You'd be surprised what a little restructuring around the house can do. Enlist the help of family and friends to make your home COPD friendly.

Simple ideas which make daily tasks easier will reduce your fatigue. Keep items you use every day in waist-high cupboards, so you aren't having to reach up or bend over. Many people living with COPD become more breathless when they have to reach up or bend over, and by limiting the reaching or bending over for something can help reduce fatigue.

Many small measures like this add up to what I call energy savings. So, energy saving changes can help lessen COPD fatigue. Think smart, work on plans to save energy, so you don't fall into the fatigue trap.

It's important to change up your waking routine to fight off COPD fatigue, starting with these techniques:

Exercise Daily

Moderate exercise can have a huge impact on your amount and quality of sleep. The reasons for this improvement aren't completely clear, but it might have to do with the drop in body temperature after an exercise session.

That fall in temperature, combined with the stress relief that comes with activity, can promote sleep.

Eat for Relaxation

The calories in food are meant to energize your body, but certain foods can also help to calm your mind and release tension in your tissues. With calming minerals like potassium, or relaxing chemicals like tryptophan, these foods are some of the best for relaxing the body and preparing for sleep:

- Milk
- Honey
- Banana
- Avocado
- Seafood
- Tea

Next page: improving your sleep hygiene and staying energized despite COPD fatigue.

Tips on How to Minimize COPD Fatigue

Improve Your Sleep Hygiene

“Sleep hygiene” is a term to describe all the things you do before bed that will make or break your sleep. This is a routine, and routines rest on consistency: for better sleep and more energy, you need to improve sleep hygiene every night.

In general, slow down every element of your life by mid-afternoon. This means no alcohol or caffeine (both will disrupt sleep) past 3 p.m., getting your exercise in the first half of the day, and having your last big meal of the day fairly early in the evening.

Get ready for bed at the same time each night, and use your bed only for sleep. Move your television out of the room, and keep the temperature a bit cooler than the rest of your home, if you can. Your chances of sleeping through the night are much better in a quiet, dark, cool environment.

Lifestyle Changes for More Energy

We all know giving up cigarettes and taking medications can have a huge effect on our energy levels. What we eat and how much we exercise also can have a big impact on how we feel. Most respiratory specialists will encourage patients to exercise as it has been proven to enhance exercise tolerance and energy levels.

What many patients don’t realize is the type of food you eat can also have a huge impact on your energy levels. If you sit down and have a pizza for lunch, chances are you’ll want to curl up and sleep afterward, as these types of foods are high in carbohydrates have limited nutritional value.

However, a nice salad with a moderate portion of fish, chicken or beef will have you better prepared and better fuelled to make the most of your day. If you’re not sure about the type of food you should be eating, ask your doctor to refer you to a qualified dietician to point you in the right direction.

Managing COPD is a process, and managing COPD fatigue is part of this process. Knowledge, medication, nutrition, and exercise are the four pillars of COPD wellness. If you manage your disease using these principals you will not only manage your fatigue better, and you will enjoy a better quality of life.

How to Stay Energized

Getting enough sleep is important, but it might not be enough to boost your energy and keep it up. Your COPD symptoms are bound to act up as the day progresses, especially as you’re exposed to irritants, engage in activities, and deal with fluctuating emotions.

Be sure to give yourself an extra advantage in the battle to stay awake and alert, by:

Taking Advantage of Your Mornings

A sprightly, happy morning can set the pace for the rest of your day. Pay closer attention to starting each day off on the right note, with an energizing breakfast that's kind to your lungs.

Eat some fruit for healthy carbs, get a bit of protein for long-lasting energy, and top it off with a cup of black tea, which contains a compound called theophylline that helps to open up your airways.

Get in the habit of doing something uplifting early each day, too. If you like to read the paper, end on a positive note with a happy story, or a page of the comics.

Do a crossword puzzle to get your brain in gear and your creativity flowing. A good mood will directly feed and maintain your energy stores, so don't neglect your emotional comfort.

Fueling Your Body Properly

A good breakfast is a good start, but you need to eat strategically throughout the day to stay energized for hours. Plan your meals for the week in advance, so you know your body will be getting a variety of food, and all the nourishment it needs.

Just as it's important to go to bed at the same time each night, it's crucial you eat around the same time each day. A predictable routine will help your body find a natural rhythm for better balance, and well-spaced meals will fuel your muscles and keep your blood sugar even.

Getting Outdoor Exercise

All exercise is good for you, but heading out into the fresh air for your activity can have twice the impact on energy levels. Recent research out of the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry has found that people who exercise outside experience more revitalization and energy, as well as less tension and confusion, and the effects are almost immediate.

Controlling your COPD symptoms is the first step to energizing your body. After all, the more oxygen you get into your cells, the better they function, so use your medicine and any other complementary therapies exactly as your doctor prescribes.

Once you've got a handle on the pharmaceutical side, a few lifestyle changes can lead to a remarkable increase in energy, and a more comfortable, interactive life.