COPD and Sex

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Maintaining a Healthy and Satisfying Sex Life

COPD symptoms are notorious for interfering with freedom and lifestyle. When you struggle to breathe easily, you must monitor your activity and environment closely, and that may mean giving up some things that have made you happy in the past.

Fortunately, those with COPD don't necessarily have to give up on a satisfying sex life, nor should they: many science-backed and anecdotal studies agree that physical intimacy and regular sexual activity can improve everything from mind and mood to sleep patterns and heart health.

However, in order to protect your lungs, breathe comfortably, and enjoy the activity to the fullest, you may need to make some adjustments and take some precautions.

Why Communication is Key

The fear of a sudden COPD exacerbation is as much of a barrier to intimacy as the physical symptoms themselves. When you don't share your concerns with your partner, the worry can build to unmanageable proportions quickly, and there's a good chance sex and intimacy will lose some of its appeal.

On the other hand, an open and honest discussion about your concerns, limitations, and ideas for adapting sex to suit your COPD can open the door to a more satisfying sex life than you had imagined. If you're not sure how to start the dialogue, address your most troublesome worries first:

- **Fatigue**. If you can explain how your fatigue tends to hit you, including the physical feelings that come with it, your partner will be more understanding when your fatigue interrupts an intimate episode. Discuss possible ways to conserve energy, and how to spot the signs of an impending crash, so your partner can help you stay in the comfort zone. Prepare to take breaks if you need to!

- **Respiratory spasms**. Exacerbations are a worst case scenario, but some COPD sufferers may experience less severe bronchospasms during sex. Give your partner a heads-up if you're prone to these attacks, and keep your inhaler close by in case you need a quick dose of medication during intercourse. Let them know the symptoms beforehand, so they won't be startled if you need to stop to address them.
- **Expectations**. It can be an awkward subject, especially with a new sexual partner, but there are plenty of benefits to discussing your expectations before you make love. Sometimes your expectations won't match, and that's OK: when you talk things through beforehand, you give each other the opportunity to make some compromises, think creatively, and overcome any looming fears of inadequacy or disappointment.

Starting the conversation is the hardest part; once you begin to share concerns about your COPD symptoms, it gets easier to dig into deeper topics. You may find it easier to break the ice with a letter or email rather than a

face-to-face conversation, but try not to dance around the subject. The clearer you make yourself now, the fewer challenges you'll run into later on.

Next page: strategies for a comfortable sex life.

Strategies for a Comfortable Sex Life

Like any exercise, hobby, or physical task, sex will be easier on your body when you learn to compensate for your COPD symptoms. This involves good preparation, listening to your body, and adapting your environment to help you and your partner stay comfortable during love making.

Improve Your Fitness

This may seem like a no-brainer, but the importance of exercise cannot be overstated when it comes to sex and COPD. Get in the habit of gentle, but regular endurance training: gradually add a few minutes to your daily walks, or if you're not sure how to up your level of activity safely, consider joining a pulmonary rehab program at a local hospital for some help with building your exercise tolerance.

Plan Ahead

There's no doubt that energy levels wax and wane throughout the day, and if you choose a time when you naturally feel more awake and energized, you can count on more stamina between the sheets. It doesn't have to be set in stone – spontaneity is one of the nicest parts of a healthy sex life – but try to take advantage of good opportunities.

Keep the Air Circulating

When breathing becomes more difficult during strenuous activity, a cool breeze can help you catch your breath and ease your anxiety. Keeping the bedroom window open or placing a fan near the bed can keep air flowing through the room, but be sure to clean away any irritants beforehand – when dust, pet hair, and smoke gets stirred up, your lungs will almost certainly react.

Prepare for Sex as You Would Prepare for Exercise

If your doctor recommends taking a certain medication before your workout, be sure to take it before sex, too. A short-acting bronchodilator is helpful for most people, but for others, supplemental oxygen may also be necessary. You can get extended oxygen tubing to grant you more freedom of movement when you're hooked up to the tank.

An oximeter can help you determine your oxygen needs. Wearing this small electronic device on your fingertip will indicate how much oxygen is in your blood during activity, and if it falls below 88% saturation, supplemental oxygen could bring a noticeable improvement to your breathing and energy during sex.

Changing Your Perspective on COPD and Sex

There's no doubt that physical limitations can be frustrating, but you can use your COPD as a jumping off point for sexual exploration and adaptation. The missionary position can become too strenuous, and you may find that certain types of pressure interfere with your breathing or lead to chest discomfort. Instead of dwelling on the fact that traditional positions are too taxing, enjoy experimenting with new positions, and maybe try using aids or toys.

Remember that the intimacy is what matters most, so don't focus too hard on reaching climax. Live in the moment and strive to appreciate your partner. The more attention you give to all the little, caring gestures (hugs, kisses, and caresses), the more likely you'll enjoy the experience, and your sex life will develop in positive ways.

Many people with a chronic disease feel self-conscious during sex, but don’t let your hang-ups interfere with your happiness. After all, everyone deserves to enjoy the comforts and rewards of intimacy.