Understanding Your Chronic Cough With COPD

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What You Need to Know About Your COPD and Chronic Cough

Coughing can be uncomfortable, but it's also disruptive. When the cough continues, you may start to feel frustrated, embarrassed, and simply exhausted. And while many COPD patients struggle with a bad cough that comes and goes, some suffer from a nearly constant cough – one that interferes with everything from communication to daily activity to sleep.

Unfortunately, there is no simple solution for COPD and chronic cough, partly because doctors are divided on whether coughing should be restrained or allowed to continue unimpeded.

Learn how coughing works for and against your COPD, so you and your doctor can make a sound decision when it comes to treatment.

What Your Cough is Telling You

A deep, productive cough is one of the most prevalent symptoms of COPD, and although it can sound and feel awful, it's not necessarily bad for your lungs. Getting rid of mucus is an important part of breathing easier, and deep coughing is your body's way of expelling the phlegm that's blocking your airways. A strong cough is especially helpful to bring up the sputum from the deepest recesses of your bronchial tubes, which is why many pulmonary doctors suggest controlled coughing to make the most out of those muscle contractions.

Although coughing is ultimately helpful for your breathing, an increase in severity or frequency can be alarming, and may even be cause for concern. Visit your doctor if you notice:

- A change in the amount or color of your sputum
- Blood in your mucus
- You're coughing more than usual
- Your coughing begins to interfere with speaking, walking, and modest activity

If your cough begins to last for longer periods or is triggered by anything and everything, you may be dealing with a COPD exacerbation or another respiratory illness (known as a co-morbidity). Pneumonia, influenza, or even acid reflux can prolong your cough and make it uncomfortable to clear your airways.

The most important step is an accurate diagnosis, which will require a trip to the doctor's office and perhaps a series of breathing and blood tests. If your doctor can trace the cough to another infection or illness, you can begin appropriate treatment, and hopefully reduce your COPD coughing attack quickly. If it turns out that your COPD is to blame, you may be able to make some changes in your disease management to quell some of the coughing.

Tips to Help Ease COPD and Chronic Cough Attacks

Most doctors are hesitant to prescribe cough suppressants, since coughing is your body's way of clearing a path for better breathing. However, when a bad cough begins to interfere too much with your daily life, there are steps you can take to adjust your current COPD treatments and daily habits to ease the COPD coughing fit without harming your body's natural defenses.

In addition to embracing diet and herbs for cough relief, you can:

Next page: More tips on how to ease both COPD and chronic cough attacks.

Tips to Help Ease COPD and Chronic Cough Attacks

Adjust Your Medications

Some medications are good for a cough (certain medicated cough syrups, for example), some are neutral (like corticosteroids), but some are quite bad for your cough. If you're taking long-acting anticholinergics (like Spiriva) to relax your airways, your cough reflex can become very sensitive, leading to a nagging, constant cough.

Luckily, there are other options, so speak to your doctor about alternative types of bronchodilators (like long-acting beta-agonists) to treat your COPD symptoms.

Stay Hydrated

The more water you drink, the better hydrated your body will be, and the thinner your mucus will become. Thin mucus is much easier to clear out of your lungs than thick mucus, which means you stand a better chance of clearing your airways with a few controlled coughs, and can then enjoy some easy breathing.

Remember that caffeinated and alcoholic beverage don't count as water: they are diuretics, which encourage your body to expel more water, leaving your tissues and mucus membranes less hydrated.

Try Pulmonary Rehabilitation

Strengthening the respiratory system and improving lung efficiency is a long-term solution for chronic cough. Although activity can lead to more coughing, pulmonary rehabilitation is a targeted therapy that safely challenges the limits of your lungs to improve your energy levels and endurance. As the muscles in your chest and around your airways get stronger, you can achieve more force and efficiency with each cough.

Manage GERD

Living with COPD can increase your chances of developing GERD, where stomach acid travels up and into the esophagus, and in some cases, further up into the vocal cords. Almost 50% of COPD patients also suffer from GERD, making them more prone to exacerbations and inflammation of the throat, which will worsen their cough.

If you suspect dealing with COPD and GERD is adding to your cough, you may need to adjust your medications, but changes to your diet can make a big difference, too. First, cut out any foods that contribute to acid reflex: spicy ingredients, alcohol, caffeine, citrus fruits, tomatoes, garlic, and peppermint are common culprits.

Of course, every stomach is a little different, and you may notice other foods bring on heartburn and indigestion. Make a list of your trigger foods, and use it to guide your food choices each and every day.

Take Control of Your COPD Care

Unfortunately, the assessment and treatment of COPD cough have taken a backseat to other prominent discomforts, like breathlessness and fatigue. It's not that doctors aren't aware of COPD cough, but rather that a chronic cough with COPD isn't always recognized as a disabling symptom. In order to get the relief and advice

you need, you may have to speak up for yourself a bit more.

Explain to your doctor exactly how your COPD and chronic cough are interfering in your life, and be specific about what you're feeling – physically and emotionally. Do the same with your family and peer support groups, so they can find a better way to empathize and help you get some relief. Good support is incredibly important for a better quality of life with COPD, but you need to reach out for that helping hand.