How Can Pulmonary Rehabilitation Help COPD Patients?

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

The Importance of Pulmonary Rehabilitation for COPD Patients

Pulmonary rehabilitation is a great addition to drugs and oxygen therapy for COPD management. It consists of an exercise program, educational sessions to help you achieve more results, including breathing easier, improving lung function, having more energy, feeling and living better.

If you haven't started pulmonary rehabilitation for COPD yet, talk to your doctor to see if you can benefit from it.

What to Expect from Pulmonary Rehabilitation Exercises

The key component of pulmonary rehab is the exercise program, and some rehab centers will focus exclusively on these. You will learn and practice a variety of exercises, some will even target the lower body (through walking on a treadmill or stair climbing).

According to research studies, leg exercises have been shown to greatly improve lung function. Upper body exercises will focus on improving your breathing and better deal with day-to-day activities — many exercises in this group will target the arms and chest (for example turning a crank against resistance or lifting your arms against gravity).

Other exercises are specifically designed to make your breathing muscles stronger: you will get a mouthpiece and have to breathe through it against resistance. These exercises are especially recommended for those who have weak lung function.

Expect to lift some weights during the rehab program as well. Strength training has proven benefits for COPD sufferers because it increases muscle strength and bulk while helping you breathe easier and have more energy.

The Educational Components of Pulmonary Rehabilitation for COPD Patients

Some centers include educational sessions, delivered one-on-one or in a group. During these sessions, you learn about the medications you take (how to use inhalers properly, how the drugs work), or how to use oxygen therapy.

If you still smoke, you will learn about the benefits of quitting smoking, how to quit smoking (techniques, treatment options) and how to stay away from cigarettes for the rest of your life.

Some centers offer psychological support and provide relaxation techniques and counseling. Dietary recommendations are also included because a healthy diet is essential to manage COPD and it's symptoms better.

A Look at Russell's Experience With Pulmonary Rehabilitation for COPD

I’m often amazed by how many people diagnosed with COPD are unaware of the importance of pulmonary rehabilitation for COPD treatment and just how important it is to consider different rehab options to find a program that’s right for them.

What Is Pulmonary Rehabilitation?

Pulmonary rehabilitation programs are designed to educate patients about their disease and start them on a basic exercise program that includes breathing techniques to help them breathe more effectively when problems arise.

Programs will vary from country to country, but the same theories apply. When looking into rehab programs, find one that's ongoing and aims to increase your exercise capacity. For me, this is very important, as I'm a firm believer in vigorous exercise for COPD patients as the benefits have been shown.

Next page: more of Russell's experience with pulmonary rehab for COPD.

Why Do You Need Pulmonary Rehabilitation for COPD?

When you’re diagnosed with COPD, you have two choices: you can sit in the corner and let the disease take your life away or you can make the best out of the hand you've been dealt.

Pulmonary rehab is a stepping-stone to taking charge of your disease and having an improved quality of life. By undertaking pulmonary rehab, you’re starting a chain of events that will gradually improve your overall fitness and strength.

We know professional athletes benefit from having efficient muscles. Efficient muscles are stronger and use oxygen more efficiently. The same applies to people with lung disease — the more improved our muscle efficiency, the better our use of oxygen, the less breathless we become, the better we feel, the more we can achieve in our day-to-day lives.

This is why we need pulmonary rehab. Patients concerned about being breathless need not worry if they are in a well-run rehab clinic as professionals will monitor your vital signs to make sure nothing goes wrong. Remember: even the best pro athletes experience breathlessness and they know that it’s all part of improving their fitness. We as COPD patients are no different.

What to Avoid

I’ve had plenty of experience with pulmonary rehab since I was diagnosed with COPD — contacting clinics where the information I was given on the structure and timing of the program wasn’t clear; getting referred and having to make extra calls to follow up or being told to talk to someone else; and turning up excited to start my program only to find out it wasn’t what I thought it would be.

Once, I attended what I thought was going to an advanced pulmonary rehabilitation class, only to find it was actually a one-on-one session with a physiotherapist who put me through the six-minute walk test, wrote me an exercise program to work on alone, and asked me to come back in three weeks.

The program was very poorly written and in all honesty, I wouldn’t use it or suggest anyone else use it. One of the glaring faults for me was the inclusion of a weights program with no mention of what weights to use.

What to Look for in a Pulmonary Rehabilitation Clinic

A good clinic has to align with your ideals. For me, that includes healthy eating, education about the disease, taking your medication properly and plenty of exercise.

Patient monitoring is a must, involving regular checking of heart rate and rhythm, blood pressure and oxygen levels. It's also important to check how the patient is feeling especially if they're new to pulmonary rehab.

Dietary and weight loss or gain advice is also an important aspect of what a good rehab clinic should offer. Getting your weight to its ideal level is high on the list of priorities to enable you to manage your COPD. If the clinic has a dietitian available for advice, you know it's looking at their patients in a holistic way. Perfect!

Another very important feature should be an emphasis on regular exercise and a program that works towards building a patient's exercise capacity. Many patients tend to become stuck in a rut or drop out of exercise programs for a couple of reasons: either finding the program too difficult or finding it boring and failing to motivate them, so it's important to have some variety in the exercises.

Ongoing consultation with the patient to find their favored exercise, as well as what they'd like to achieve, is an important tool to maintain motivation. Creating a fun environment in which to exercise is also important on a social level. I've experienced many hours of training solo and would much prefer group sessions with people of similar abilities, working hard together but having fun doing it.