Decrease Chronic COPD Pain With a Realistic Approach

by ANGELA FINLAY

How to Cope With COPD Pain

Your COPD diagnosis was probably a result of multiple physicians or hospital visits, complaints of inability to breathe. After stabilizing your breathing and receiving a diagnosis, it's likely you received some education about your diagnosis – like the GOLD stages of COPD.

As your diagnosis progressed, you probably didn't realize that along with the shortness of breath and the wheezing; you'd have pain. Because no one really talks about that, right? However, in a study published in the *Journal of Pain*, 45% of people with COPD reported moderate to severe pain.

Well, there's no perfect way to deal with the pain associated with COPD, but here are some tips that can help.

Understand the Pathophysiology of COPD

As a COPD-sufferer, you understand that your condition is chronic and irreversible. It is not a typical condition that we associate with pain. So, when you're feeling pain, what exactly is going on?

Well, the pain associated with COPD is not actually lung pain, but chest pain. The chest pain is not heart pain, but of the musculature of the chest associated with the coughing. Another reason for COPD pain is that the lungs basically blow up like balloons, and the lungs cause pressure to be exerted on various organs in the chest – the diaphragm, the chest wall, and the spine. Any activity can exacerbate the pain.

Pain can also be caused by osteoporosis, which occurs in an estimated 20% of COPD-sufferers. The osteoporosis may be caused by poor nutrition, the use of certain medications, such as steroids, a history of smoking, and inactivity.

Heart & Lung: The Journal of Acute and Critical Care noted that "people with advanced COPD often experience significant pain. It's usually located in the shoulders, neck, upper arms, and chest… The researchers conclude that more studies are needed to learn how pain affects COPD management."

Manage Your COPD and COPD Pain

Probably the best thing you can do to cope with your COPD pain is to prevent it from occurring in the first place – and you can do this by taking your medications as prescribed.

Your physician likely has you on a myriad of medications to treat your COPD, from a controller medication that is taken every day, to a rescue medication that is taken when symptoms flare.

- A controller medication does not work immediately but does work in the long-term.
- A rescue medication is taken at the onset of symptoms and works immediately.

A combination of both rescue and controller medications are typically prescribed to manage COPD. Utilizing both medications can prevent COPD pain from occurring; notifying your physician if you are using too much of a rescue medication is also important.

COPD Pain Relief

If you're working hard to manage your COPD and are still experiencing pain, there are a number of things you can do to manage your pain and your condition at the same time.

- **Pain medications.** You can utilize over-the-counter analgesics, such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen, for mild to moderate pain. However, you may need prescription opioids for more severe pain. These types of medications may include oxycodone and hydrocodone. They should be used with caution and not in larger than prescribed doses because they can actually decrease breathing.
- **Pulmonary rehabilitation.** This therapy utilizes a combination of physical therapy, breathing retraining, and emotional support to decrease pain and strengthen the muscular walls of the chest.
- **If COPD pain is associated and aggravated by emotions, a prescription for an antidepressant can be extremely helpful.** The use of antidepressants may reduce anxiety as well as reduce pain, especially if used in conjunction with pulmonary rehabilitation.
- **Learn to relax.** Chronic worry can affect chronic pain. COPD sufferers undoubtedly worry sometimes, but when that worry gets out of control, your mind and body can seize up, and you won't be able to relax for hours. The key is to find a technique that will let you squash those worrisome thoughts right away.

- **Hot and cold treatments.** The warmth of a heat pack will increase blood flow and soothe aching tissue, while a cold pack at the site of pain will reduce inflammation and swelling. You can use both interchangeably, or whichever one is more appropriate for the type of pain you are experiencing.
- **Physical therapy and massage.** Both are excellent ways to manage sore muscles and joints, plus a physical therapist can offer helpful techniques for you to manage aching joints and muscles at home.
- **Meditation.** More mental control can mean better physical control, and meditative techniques can teach you how to improve your breathing, calm your muscles and distract yourself from the pain.

Set Realistic Goals

Setting realistic goals is important. Realize that sometimes, your pain will be under control with seemingly no effort. There will also be days will your pain will be pretty bad and you will feel rough.

Set a goal. You know that pain scale at your physician's office, where you are asked to rate your pain on a "zero to 10 scale"? Perhaps your pain will realistically never be a zero. However, if you set a goal to have your pain be at a two or a three on *most days,* you can utilize different tactics to manage your pain.