Coping With COPD in Heat & Humidity

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Getting Through Summer With COPD

COPD patients should constantly be aware of their surroundings and any potential triggers that could exacerbate their disease.

What quite often goes under the radar is heat, barometric pressure and COPD. Like any trigger, a hot humid day can make life difficult for COPD patients.

Why Do I Become Breathless When Summer Arrives?

Remember when you were young and couldn't wait until summer was here? The beach, swimming and water sports were things we looked forward to. While I still love a day at the beach and participating in summer activities, I find that I have to be a little more aware of what a summer day is going to bring.

Feeling the sun on you is one of life's great pleasures, and we need vitamin D, but when the humidity starts to rise our airways start to struggle.

As the day becomes hotter and the humidity in the air rises and as a result becomes more dense, the air passing in and out our airways becomes restricted. The result for COPD patients is a worsening of symptoms.

A 2014 study, presented at the American Thoracic Society International Conference, highlighted the increase in symptoms for patients when exposed to higher temperatures both inside and outside the home. Researchers noted that the study's results have important implications for the treatment of COPD as the climate gradually becomes warmer.

My own experience when exercising shows big differences in my performance between summer and winter. When running or cycling in summer my heart rate is elevated, which in turn exacerbates my COPD symptoms.

I become breathless and experience a rise in the amount of mucus I produce. From this, my oxygen levels start to fluctuate and exercise has to be slowed. In cooler weather it's the extract opposite; I'm able to exercise to a greater level as I don't suffer the effects of heat and humidity.

What's the Answer?

Until researchers can find a solution to this widespread problem for COPD patients we have to take measures to limit our exposure. That doesn't necessarily mean locking ourselves indoors for the summer holidays but it does mean being prepared.

Looking at weather forecasts and planning your daily activities around the weather can reduce your exposure. For me it means exercising in the early morning or late afternoon. This way I'm avoiding the heat and humidity during

the middle of the day.

Next page: living in hot climates.

What's the Answer?

Part of my job entails being outdoors in the heat of summer, and in Australia we can have very hot and humid summers. Days when I'm exposed to the heat I make sure I'm well hydrated by drinking plenty of water. I also take note of shaded areas to go and rest if need be. It comes down to planning and being aware of your surroundings and refuges that can be used to help keep cool.

Plan your day so you're in air-conditioned buildings or can take advantage of a cool breeze. If you don't have air conditioning in your home and need to escape during the hottest part of the day, consider going to a shopping center, movie theatre, library or other air-conditioned building. If you are in a work environment make your employer aware of your needs, explaining to them that you'll be far more productive if you're in a cool, comfortable place.

Making sure you're well hydrated is important at anytime or year but especially so in summer. A water bottle should be within reach at all times. Sipping water regularly will not only keep your fluids up but help keep you cool.

Clothing will play a part in how well you can deal with the heat, too. Light, well-vented materials designed to keep cool are a great idea. Hats, neck scarves and a head bandana can all help keep the heat out.

While these suggestions may sound obvious, so many times we fail to plan and forget the simple things that can make such a difference to day-to-day life.

Inevitably we'll have those summer days where the heat seems inescapable, and these days are the most dangerous for worsening of symptoms. It's important to make sensible decisions on these days. If going to work will pose a risk, call your boss and explain the situation; working more flexible hours may be a solution.

If you're at home it's important to do what can, whether that's opening windows, pulling down blinds to block direct sunlight or switching on the air conditioning. Most importantly, keep a phone close by; if your symptoms worsen and can't be controlled, it's to time call for help.

Living in Hot Climates

If, like me, you live in a hot or tropical climate or if you plan to move to such an environment, put some thought into the type of house is most practical for you to live in. Again it comes down to planning, and whether you live in a trailer or a castle creating the right environment to lessen the symptoms of COPD is critical.

Flooring, windows, air conditioning and the position of your home can all make a difference. Reflect on previous experience and apply what you've learned to your home. Ask other patients for tips – we have plenty of knowledge from living with the disease!

As COPD patients we don't need a research study to tell us that heat and humidity affects the way we breathe, but what it does do is remind us how important it is to prepare for summer the best we can. Talk with your doctor, family, friends and other patients about how you'll protect yourself from a hot summer season – you'll be far better prepared to deal with the heat and humidity.