What You Need to Know About COPD and GERD

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The Link Between COPD and GERD

If you have a diagnosis of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) you have a have a higher than average likelihood of also being diagnosed with gastrointestinal esophageal reflux disease (GERD), which is sometimes referred to as acid reflux disease. The symptoms of COPD and GERD exacerbate each other.

Experts disagree about the exact number of people who have both COPD and GERD, but it is estimated that between one in two and one in three people who have COPD also have GERD. Among members of rest of the population who do not suffer from GERD, approximately one out of five adults have a diagnosis of GERD.

What Are the Symptoms of GERD?

GERD symptoms, which include a feeling of fullness, burping, and heartburn, occur because stomach acid backs up into your esophagus. Your stomach is protected from the acid's effects, but your esophagus is not.

If stomach acid backs up into your throat, your vocal cords and cough reflex may be stimulated, causing you to cough more frequently and experience increased difficulty breathing.

When stomach acid enters your esophagus, it can cause inflammation of the mucosal tissues of your throat. This may result in an increased production of phlegm. In addition, inflammation may cause constriction of your airways.

How Does GERD Affect COPD Symptoms?

Having GERD places additional stress on your body. Pain, cough, inflammation and excess mucus production may result — symptoms you may already have due to your COPD. As such, GERD in conjunction with COPD may result in flare-ups of your COPD symptoms. You may also develop an increased susceptibility to respiratory tract infections.

If stomach acid gets into your lungs, you may have a severe flare-up of COPD symptoms, which could lead to pneumonia or respiratory distress.

Some research studies indicate episodes of GERD may predict flare-ups of COPD. Further research is needed to determine if GERD impacts the progression of chronic bronchitis and emphysema, but currently, it is not believed that GERD worsens outcomes.

Why Does COPD Elevate GERD Risk?

Experts have several theories as to why GERD may develop more readily if you have emphysema or chronic bronchitis.

Firstly, you cough more frequently if you have COPD, and increased coughing can force stomach acid up into the esophagus, precipitating GERD symptoms. Many people who have COPD experience severe coughing spells, which may result in vomiting that can cause damage to the esophagus and throat.

Additionally, when you have COPD your lungs may become hyper-inflated. This means air remains trapped in your air passages, which increases the pressure inside your chest and abdomen. Increased pressure within your abdomen elevates pressure on the valve between the bottom of your esophagus and your stomach, making it unable to close efficiently. As a result, stomach acid is pushed up into your esophagus.

Finally, some evidence demonstrates that medications commonly used to treat COPD may worsen GERD symptoms. Increased GERD symptoms then exacerbate coughing and shortness of breath. Theophylline, corticosteroids, and beta-agonists may cause side effects that impair the function of the valve located between your stomach and esophagus.

Tips for Managing GERD and COPD

Talk with your health care provider to learn about medications available to help to control GERD and COPD. If GERD is severe, a minor surgical procedure may be indicated.

That said, there are several actions you can take at home to reduce your likelihood of developing GERD, controlling its symptoms, and lessening the condition's impact on your COPD symptoms.

- **Elevate your head while sleeping.** Elevate your head using multiple pillows to make your breathing easier and reduce reflux. If you are unable to sleep well in a bed, use a recliner.
- **If you smoke, quit.** Both GERD and COPD develop as a result of smoking.
- **Keep a diary of your COPD and GERD symptoms.** Note what you eat, whether or not you consume alcohol, and any other factors you think may contribute to your symptoms or lack of them.
- **Don't eat before bed.** Do not eat for at least two to three hours prior to retiring for the night.
- **Avoid trigger foods.** Common foods that trigger GERD symptoms include carbonated beverages, alcohol, caffeine, and spicy or greasy foods. Gas-producing foods like dried legumes, onions, cucumbers, and members of the cabbage family are also poorly tolerated by many patients.
- **Do not overuse antacids.** Overuse may mask symptoms of other illnesses, create a rebound effect of increased acid production, interfere with digestion, and impact general wellness.
- **Seek prompt treatment of COPD and GERD.** Both are progressive illnesses that respond best to treatment when interventions are instituted early.
- **Thoroughly chew your food.** This stimulates the release of enzymes that help your digestive tract to function optimally.
- **Take steps to manage stress in your life.** Stress worsens symptoms of GERD and COPD.
- **Eat your fruits and veggies.** Include raw or lightly cooked fruits and vegetables in your diet — these foods contain enzymes that enhance digestion.

- **Eat fermented foods daily.** Examples include natural sauerkraut, yogurt, and kefir. These foods contain healthy types of bacteria that promote the health of your digestive tract and enhance your immunity.
- **Take orange peel extract.** Consider supplementing your diet with orange peel extract, which provides a protective coating to your esophagus and aids transit of food from your mouth to your stomach.
- **Pay attention to your body's hunger signals.** Eat when you are hungry, but stop before you feel completely full. By listening to your body you will be less likely to overeat, which will help you to control your weight as well as the symptoms of COPD and GERD.
- **Maintain a healthy weight.** If you are overweight, commit to losing a few pounds. Excess weight puts pressure on your abdomen and makes breathing more difficult.
- **Try herbal remedies.** Consider using herbs to support the health of your lungs and digestive tract. Marshmallow root and aloe vera provide protective barriers for your digestive tract, lubricating your respiratory system thereby relieving dry coughs and making thick mucus easier to cough up.

By controlling symptoms of COPD and GERD you will be more comfortable, have fewer flare-ups of either

condition and be free to enjoy your life more fully. Consult with your health care provider for individualized advice.