A Guide to COPD for Beginners

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

I Have COPD. What Now?

Are you a newly diagnosed COPD patient and not sure what to do next?

Many patients want direction but are overwhelmed with the variety of advice they're given. While I'm not a doctor, I can share my experience and what I've learnt along the way.

The Diagnosis

After my initial consultation with my lung specialist I was sent to my local respiratory clinic for pulmonary function tests. I knew something was wrong but wasn't sure what it was. I'd been an asthmatic since I was a child and suspected it had just become worse. When I returned to my doctor for the results I wasn't prepared for what came next.

"Russell, I have your results and they're not great — your lung function is at 22% and you have COPD, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. You will probably need a double lung transplant within five years."

Many people around the world of a variety of ages receive this news on a daily basis, so where do we go from here?

Taking It In

I'm not sure how long it took for me to accept my diagnosis, but it's a necessary step on your way to your new life as a COPD patient. The feelings of, "Why me?"and "It's not fair," are strong and it's easy to spiral into a negative state of mind. The best advice I can give is to understand your disease and realize that whilst this isn't something you asked for, it's what you've been dealt and now you have to adapt.

In previous articles I've talked about the psychological battles for COPD patients, and these battles start from day one. Being in control of your head space early in your diagnosis is very important in relation to your long term management of your disease. There is plenty of negative information and people who can set you on a destructive path. It's essential you don't fall into that trap.

Get the Important Stuff Right

Rule Number One: If you are still smoking you have to QUIT! It amazes me how many patients continue smoking after they have been diagnosed with COPD. To me it's a no brainer! If smoking has been responsible for your diagnosis then continuing to do so is going to end very poorly for you.

Ask an ex-smoker how good they feel because they've quit smoking, I can guarantee they won't say they feel worse.

Rule Number Two: Where is your health at? Yes, you have COPD but what about the rest of you? To move forward it's important to make sure your body and any other ailments are well managed. Many COPD patients have more than one issue with their health and the approach to take must be more holistic.

Talk to all your medical practitioners about forming a management plan that is best for you and your issues. I personally have three Doctors who liaise with each other, so collectively they can have the best health outcomes for me.

Rule Number Three: Never stop learning! I love to listen and read about the experiences of people involved in the COPD community, from patients to carers and medical professionals. There's not a week goes by that I don't learn more about my disease and how I can do things better.

I'm proud of how far I've come since being diagnosed and believe that my story has many more chapters, but I realize that my best way to manage my disease is to keep learning.

Next page: medications, weight management and healthy eating.

Medications

Your lung specialist will prescribe you with the medication they feel is the appropriate for you to take. Not all COPD patients take the same type or quantities of medication and it is important that you adhere to what your doctor has instructed you to do rather than taking medication advice from those not qualified.

Remember to take your medication as prescribed as it's important not to miss a day or two as this will reduce its effectiveness. I take my meds before brushing my teeth morning and night, and this routine has become habit ensuring I don't forget.

Get Rid of What's Weighing You Down

Weight control is, in my opinion, critical for COPD patients — my own lessons are a good way to emphasize this. If you have read any of my other articles you'll know I exercise a lot (because exercise and COPD can absolutely go together!), but after long endurance events I reduce my training somewhat so that my body and mind can recuperate. I tend to put on between 4–6kgs in weight during these times, which in turn has an effect on my breathing.

In reality this is not a huge amount of weight gain, but it is enough to make my breathing more laboured and day-to-day chores more difficult. But losing too much weight can have a negative impact as well, as I've found out in the past. After several months of heavy training my weight dropped to 66kgs, which is about 3kgs under what I consider my perfect weight.

The result was an overall feeling of weakness, susceptibility to illness and low energy levels, and I know now this weight is too low for me. I would categorize myself now as in a healthy weight range and it's important for everyone to find what their own ideal weight is.

Food for Life

It's true, you are what you eat! If that scares you then I suspect the foods you are eating may not be the best choice. Diet is not a word I like as for me it's short term, and what you eat should be food for life. Changing your eating choices for 12 weeks will do little for your health in the long term. However, with that said, dieting it is a very good way to educate yourself of the basic dos and don’ts of good food choices. A diet can be the beginning of a healthier eating regime.

Eating healthy foods should be a lifestyle choice. The foods you eat should be nutritious and preferably natural, not man made. If you entered the search term “healthy foods to eat” into your computer it would come up with so

many pages of suggestions that would make your head spin.

I'm not a nutritionalist and don't profess to know everything about what you should and shouldn't eat. What I can tell you is what works for me, and that is eating foods that are natural and not refined. I avoid grains, gluten and refined sugars.

A nutritionalist with many years experience once told me picking healthy foods to eat is easy; if it's man made don't eat it, if it's natural eat it in moderation. Stick to that rule and you'll be well on track to fuelling your body well.

Move It or Lose It

This is the deal breaker! Regardless of your age and the severity of your disease, your physical activity is going to determine the progression of your disease. Activity can be as simple as chair exercises for those who have mobility issues, to walking, running, cycling or swimming for those who are able.

The key to remember when we talk about exercise is that the more you can do the better your body will cope with your COPD. So be positive, listen and learn — you can live well with COPD, as you are the master of your destiny.