Tips for Staying Safe With COPD in Cold Weather

by ANGELA FINLAY

Coping With COPD and Cold Weather

With contributions from Russell Winwood.

Changes in the weather are notorious for interrupting breathing patterns, especially when you live with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Heat, humidity, dry air, wind, rain, cold — every climate characteristic has the potential to trigger symptoms, and in the worst cases, dangerous exacerbations.

The keys to a safe and healthy winter are avoiding COPD pneumonia and counteracting the cold. First learn why and how the cold weather can harm your lungs, and then take some proven steps to reduce winter's nasty effects and stay in control of your COPD.

How COPD Symptoms Can Change in Extreme Weather

Temperatures below freezing and above 90 degrees tend to bother most COPD sufferers in a number of ways. When the mercury dips, it's not uncommon to notice shortness of breath, more phlegm, wheezing, and fatigue.

Chilly weather isn't always nice and straightforward. In fact, cold weather can come in different forms, and each brings its own challenges for COPD:

High Humidity

Most people with COPD respond poorly to high humidity. A bit of moisture in the air can help lubricate the airways, but too much will make the air too dense to breathe easily.

Winter humidity is typically much more manageable than summer humidity (which can take the form of smog), but living in a damp, cool climate can also cause trouble for those with COPD.

Dry Air

It doesn't have the weight and resistance of humid air, but cold, dry air can irritate your airways and interfere with your breathing, too. With each breath, the tissues that line your nose and throat dry out, and will probably provoke more coughing fits and uncomfortable scratchy feelings.

Breathing through your nose helps to warm and moisten the air before it reaches your lungs; if you tend to breathe through your mouth, you may find your symptoms escalate quickly.

Low Pressure

For some people with COPD, changes in the barometric pressure can affect symptoms just as much as changes

in temperature. However, not every patient reacts to air pressure in the same way: while many find that low-pressure systems make it hard to breathe (a consequence of less oxygen in the air), others struggle more with high-pressure weather. In any case, the barometric pressure outside can certainly affect the passage of air into your body.

Wind

Cold wind is certainly uncomfortable, but it can be especially challenging to handle when you have breathing issues. COPD attacks your lung efficiency, and any extra pressure can put a major strain on your ability to take in air.

A cold wind blowing in your face disrupts the natural flow of air into your nose and mouth, and you may find yourself struggling for each breath. Walking against the wind also brings physical resistance, which means you'll be exerting yourself more with each step and draining your energy.

Tips for Coping With COPD and Cold Weather

COPD and weather during the winter is not easy to navigate, but your daily choices can take some of the pressure off. Luckily, there are several ways to keep warm, stay healthy, and avoid exacerbations all season long.

Have a COPD Action Plan

The most important preparation before cold weather hits is to ensure you have a COPD action plan in place. This plan is done in consultation with your doctor. A COPD action plan is your "go to" resource if you are hit with an exacerbation.

Your doctor will advise you on the course of action to take when this happens. Make sure you have the relevant contact phone numbers of your support network easily accessible in case you become ill. Your support network is a crucial part of your COPD action plan.

Monitoring the weather is also an important part of being prepared. Knowing when you can plan to leave your home or when the weather forecast suggests staying indoors is advisable. Be aware of your surrounds outside the home. Do you live in an area where people still use woodfire heating? If so, how do you best avoid the smoke from these fires?

When it comes to looking after your health and making preparations for extreme weather conditions the better you prepare the better, you'll be prepared. Don't be afraid to reach out to other patients and ask for their tips for keeping well in cold weather. Quite often the best tips come from patients who have found what works for them.

Next page: More ways to cope with both COPD and cold weather.

Tips for Coping With COPD and Cold Weather

Protect Your Air Supply

If you're on supplemental oxygen, you may find your breathing becomes more labored and uncomfortable as the tank gets colder. If this is a problem, you'll find that keeping the oxygen hose tucked under your coat when you're out and about will help to warm the oxygen on the way to your airways.

As for your home, keep things clean and comfortable with a humidifier (or dehumidifier, as the case may be). Allergens are big COPD triggers, and they can build up quickly in the home, especially when moisture is high or when the outdoor environment can get inside. Have your furnace and ducts cleaned every year, and double check the seals on your windows and doors to ward off drafts.

Dress Well

When you go outside — and eventually, you will need to do so — you'll want to be as comfortable and mobile as possible. Lots of heavy layers will keep you warm, but they could also interfere with your movement and weigh you down.

Consider investing in a few pieces of thin merino wool layers; this ultra-breathable fabric will keep your body at the perfect temperature, but it's stretchy, soft, and thin enough to let you move freely.

If it's too cold to breathe comfortably, you can warm and humidify the air you breathe by wrapping a wool or cotton scarf around your nose and mouth, and breathing through the cloth. Be sure to wash your scarf often with fragrance-free detergent, as directly breathing in any scents could trigger symptoms.

Get Your Flu Shot

Winter is also flu season, and contracting the flu can lead directly to an exacerbation — in fact, about 65 percent of COPD exacerbations follow a respiratory infection. Since COPD already lowers your natural immunity to viruses, you'll need all the help you can get to make it through the chilly months without a respiratory complication.

Luckily, getting your annual flu shot will go far to keeping you in better health (despite what you may have heard, you cannot get the flu from the flu shot). Also, be sure to get vaccinated for pneumonia, and be diligent about your handwashing and hygiene to sidestep common colds and other infections.

Lighten Up

The darker, shorter days of winter are difficult to handle at the best of times; when you also have COPD, they can exacerbate your fatigue, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Take some of that psychological pressure off with a special light that can lift your mood and boost your energy.

Ask your doctor about using a light therapy box, which contains special fluorescent lights to spark a chemical change in your brain that will elevate your mood. The happier and more energized you are, the better your chances of staying on top of your COPD management and in charge of your health.

Prepare for Winter Weather Emergencies

Your preparations for dealing with cold weather will vary depending on where you live. Those who live in areas which experience heavy snow will prepare differently to those who don't experience snow at all. Some areas have very wet winters while others are dry.

When planning for cold weather its best to plan for the worst and hope for the best. Ensure you have adequate stocks of your medications just in case you become housebound. If you are on supplementary oxygen, make sure you have adequate supplies, as well as fully charged batteries in case of a power outage.

It's important to check on your food and heating supplies for the same reason. If you haven't done so already, ensure your heating is functioning correctly, keeping warm on those cold nights are very important for COPD patients.

The Bottom Line...

Whether you are a newly diagnosed patient or a veteran, going through winter can be daunting. Writing a list as you make your preparations can be helpful in a couple of ways. You can tick your list off to make sure you haven't forgotten anything. You can also revise your list after winter and add ideas which will make next year's winter preparations less stressful.

No matter how vigilant you are everyone will succumb to an exacerbation at some time. Being prepared and

having a plan to deal with the exacerbation can often be the difference in the severity and length of time of the exacerbation. Remember, preparation, stick to your plan and above all don’t panic.