COPD in Winter: Risks, Tips and Coping

by NEWLIFEOUTLOOK TEAM

The Best Way to Manage COPD During the Winter

In the winter your body needs a few weeks to adapt to the cold, and it does so in a few ways: the body shivers to generate warmth and the blood vessels in the arms and legs will constrict, so more blood goes to the vital organs. If you suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), however, it is harder to cope with cold weather. Viruses typically enter and spread in the airways, (and COPD is a respiratory disease), and they also cause more problems when the immune system is weakened (as it happens in COPD). Let's take a look at how you can cope with COPD in winter.

Studies About the Potential Risks During the Winter

Several research studies suggest that flu shots can effectively reduce the rate of hospitalization during cold weather (the influenza season), says a 2007 study featured in the *International Journal of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Diseases*. Specifically in individuals with chronic lung diseases (like COPD), vaccination leads to a 52 percent decrease in hospitalization and a 70 percent decrease in death rates during influenza season.

In another study, a meta-analysis showed a 56 percent decrease in respiratory illnesses and a 50 percent reduction in hospitalization, 68 percent reduction in death and 53 percent reduction in pneumonia in those participants who were vaccinated. Lastly, a 2004 randomized clinical trial demonstrates that the flu shot is highly effective in the prevention of acute respiratory diseases related to the influenza virus, regardless of the severity of COPD, other medical conditions associated, age, gender or smoking status.

Therefore, there is scientific evidence that supports the use of flu shots as a preventive measure during cold weather. There are also other things you can do to better handle low temperatures during the winter.

Tips to Cope With Cold Weather

Both cold weather and cold air aggravate the shortness of breath and fatigue which are common symptoms of COPD. Thus, if you need to spend time outdoors, you should consider wearing a scarf or mask. Try to breathe through your nose rather than your mouth, so the air you inhale will be warmer.

Inhalers can be helpful if used before going outdoors, but you should talk to your doctor first. Clothes should provide enough warmth (a few layers if needed), but at the same time they shouldn’t be too tight because it may cause difficulty breathing. If you use oxygen therapy, keep the tubes inside your clothes so they will warm up the air you breathe in.

Try to limit your exposure to cold temperatures as much as possible. Check the weather forecast and plan your grocery shopping list and other activities that require going outside during the cold weather.

Stay active, but do your exercise routine indoors — it would be even better if you can do it at home. Avoid any

contact with those who experience cold or flu symptoms. If you have trouble breathing or you feel that you caught a cold, see your doctor right away so you can get medication promptly.

Let’s not forget about some tips that can help make your home more comfortable and warm. Check the furnace filters and get it clean before the winter starts. Windows and doors should be also checked to be sealed and not allow cold air to enter your home.

If you have been diagnosed with COPD, you need to be cautious during the cold weather so you can avoid flare-ups or other complications. Keep in mind the flu shot, breathing techniques and clothing. Limit exposure to cold weather and sick people.