8 Easy Things You Can Do Today to Improve COPD Symptoms

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Easy Ways to Improve COPD Symptoms

If you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), chances are, you're having a hard time breathing. After all, difficulty breathing is the hallmark sign.

You're likely on an inhaler or two, and with any luck, they work well! My guess, though, is that they don't work well all of the time. That's probably why you're reading this article, right?

Well, friends, you're in luck.

I can't promise these tips and tricks will help everyone, but I hope that you can utilize some of the information in this article, in conjunction with your prescribed medications, to breathe just a little bit easier.

But first, let's discuss COPD just a little bit. It helps to understand very basic pathophysiology.

In my professional experience, my patients with COPD understood that they had COPD, but they didn't quite know what was happening inside their lungs. Understanding this can help you understand why some of these tips and tricks are helpful.

COPD Pathophysiology

Our lungs are comprised of many different bronchial tubes, which then branch out into tiny bronchioles. At the end of the bronchioles are tiny sacs called alveoli – there are an estimated 300 million alveoli in the lungs.

Each alveoli has capillaries that surround it. These capillaries allow for gas transfer – oxygen and carbon dioxide can make their exchange here.

In someone without COPD, when we take a breath, the alveoli fill up with air and resemble balloons. When we exhale, the alveoli deflate.

However, when someone has COPD, there is a decreased amount of oxygen flowing through the airways. *Medical News Today* states that the reasons for this are as follows:

- The bronchial tubes, bronchiole tubes, and alveoli may have lost their elasticity.
- The walls between the alveoli are damaged or have been destroyed.
- The airways, in general, may be inflamed and/or thickened.
- Excess mucus is produced in the lungs, causing the airways to clog.

Now that we've discussed the very basic pathophysiology let's discuss ways to breathe a little bit better.

Take Your Medications as Prescribed

It may sound obvious, but the first thing you should be doing is taking your prescribed inhaler and any oral medications as prescribed.

You may be thinking, “Duh. Why is this even included? Give me something I can use!”

Well, if you’re like one-third of Medicare patients, you may not be filling all of your prescriptions due to cost. This estimation comes from a survey from Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston – in 2006. And drug costs have only gone up since then, so that figure may have only increased.

Plenty of people choose between filling their prescriptions and paying the rent and groceries. Or they will spread out their medication doses so that their prescriptions last longer.

Unfortunately, not using your inhaler can mean not breathing effectively. Fortunately, there *may* be help.

For example, if you take a Spiriva, Combivent, Atrovent, Striverdi, or Sciolto inhaler, Boehringer Ingelheim offers prescription assistance to its customers. Click here for more information.

Fifth Season Financial has also compiled a list of financial assistance programs. These programs can be used for people suffering from asthma or COPD. Click here for more information.

Remember – you must be able to breathe, so find the means, if possible, to take your medications as prescribed.

Learn Some Breathing Techniques

There are a variety of different breathing exercises for COPD that will help you breathe easier.

While there are quite a few techniques that you may find helpful (and you can experiment and find what works best for you!), there are several that are known to decrease anxiety – bonus!

Pursed-lips breathing is one such breathing technique. You can use this method when you are feeling short of breath and anxious.

Here are the steps to perform pursed-lips breathing:

1. Take a breath quickly through the nose – the breath should take about two seconds.
2. Breathe out slowly through the mouth, with pursed lips. This technique helps to keep airways open. The exhalation should be at least three times as long as the inhalation.
3. Repeat the pursed-lips breathing technique several times until you are feeling less short of breath and more relaxed.

Belly breathing is also useful! You may think this sounds strange – after all, we breathe through our lungs, right? With belly breathing, we’re seeking to improve the function of the diaphragm – the muscle between the bottom of the lungs and the belly.

Here’s how to perform belly breathing:

1. Place one hand on the stomach and one on the chest.
2. Breathe in through the nose – note that your belly is pushing forward.
3. On the exhale, gently push on the abdomen with your hand to force the air out.
4. Belly breathing can be performed in conjunction with pursed-lips breathing.

Learn How to Cough

Now, this may seem like a crazy tip because a common symptom of COPD is coughing – but, hear me out!

When we feel the *need* to cough, it is reflexive, and we do it without really thinking about it. When we have a *controlled* cough, it can serve a purpose.

As you remember from learning about COPD pathophysiology, COPD causes excess mucus to be produced, and this causes the airways to become clogged. The controlled cough can effectively clear some of this mucus, improving breathing.

To perform a controlled cough…

1. Sit upright. It helps to have your arms folded over your belly.
2. Breathe in slowly through the nose while leaning forward, pressing your arms against your belly.
3. While in this position, cough two to three times – the coughs should be short and sharp.
4. Again, breathe in slowly and sniff to prevent mucus from going back into your lungs.

Stop Smoking

I'll keep this short because if you're a smoker with COPD, chances are you've had "the talk" with every physician you've come in contact with.

As an RN, I've worked with *lots* of patients with COPD. Many continue to smoke. Their rationale is that they already have COPD, so why quit now?

Well, research indicates that COPD does cause irreversible damage to the lungs, but stopping smoking can prevent further harm from occurring. Studies also suggest that COPD smokers who ultimately quit the habit end up having fewer COPD exacerbations, have less risk of dying from COPD, and have fewer hospitalizations.

Oh, and quitting smoking cuts back on your risk of a myriad of other diseases, such as lung cancer, heart disease, and stroke, to name a few.

Next page: Learn four more ways to improve COPD symptoms.

Ward Off Illness

There's a reason that your physician recommends a flu shot every year!

If you have COPD, your lungs are compromised. Someone who has COPD can get a cold and have it escalate to pneumonia – quickly. Your physician's recommendations for immunizations are important – they help to prevent illness from occurring in the first place!

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that people with COPD and asthma receive an annual flu vaccine. Also, they should have a pneumococcal vaccine to ward off pneumonia, a TDAP vaccine to prevent tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough, and a zoster vaccine to protect against shingles.

Regular handwashing is also one of the single most important things that you can do to prevent infection. Alcohol-based hand gels are also useful in most scenarios.

Get Moving

It may seem counterintuitive to recommend exercise to someone who has a breathing disorder. Besides, people with COPD are often fatigued – so it may not even be very considerate!

That being said, a regular exercise routine improves muscle tone and cardiac function. While this doesn't exactly

improve lung function, it does improve stamina and allows the oxygen to be delivered more efficiently to the muscles.

So, how do you do start an exercise routine, especially if you have been sedentary for quite some time? You should start off slowly.

According to the COPD Foundation, “Even if you think you can do more, take it slow. Your muscles are not used to working like that! Your exercise time and effort should gradually increase over time - each day, do a little more. When you’ve reached the point that you’re feeling better and breathing better, don’t stop. Keep it up at least three days a week.”

Walking is one of the most prescribed exercises for COPD – it can be done almost anywhere!

Eat for Health

A 2014 study found that people with lung diseases may have improved lung function and fewer COPD symptoms if their diets contained certain foods.

The study found that people who consumed fruit, fish, and dairy products saw the benefit. The researchers weren’t sure *why*, but one researcher, Corinne Hanson, stated that it could be the overall well-rounded diet. Also, much of the foods in these categories have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory effects.

In another study by Dr. Carlos Camargo of Harvard Medical School, study participants who consumed high amounts of fruits, vegetables, grains, and fish were less likely to develop COPD than their counterparts who ate sweets, red meats, and processed foods.

Both researchers agree that diet can play a huge role in chronic disease. Hanson stated, “I think the takeaway is that diet may be a modifiable factor for COPD patients. When we think about diet and disease, we usually think about heart disease and diabetes. But people with lung disease should be thinking about diet, too.”

Camargo echoes her sentiments. “The lesson that's emerging is that foods like fruits, vegetables and fish may be beneficial for lung health.”

The bottom line, in regards to diet? The studies have yet to be replicated, so the results are not proven, but it can’t hurt to up your intake of fruits and vegetables!

Consider Pulmonary Rehabilitation

You’d do physical therapy if you hurt your back, or if you got in a motor vehicle accident. Well, pulmonary rehabilitation is basically like physical therapy – but for your lungs!

Pulmonary rehab is a formal program that works on your fitness as well as your breathing.

The team helps you with exercise, breathing techniques, strategies for dealing with COPD, learning about medications, relaxation techniques, education about nutrition for COPD, and provide emotional support.

As you can see, pulmonary rehab is a multidisciplinary approach – therapists, social workers, and dietitians.

Pulmonary rehab is typically done on an outpatient basis, just like a physical therapy program. You need a referral from your physician, so if this sounds like a good idea to you (and it is!) have a chat with your physician.

Click here to find pulmonary rehab near you.

The Bottom Line…

We've covered a lot of tips that can improve your breathing. Taking your medications as prescribed is the most important.

If you're having a hard time affording your medications, have an honest discussion with your physician about alternatives, perhaps ask to be in touch with a social worker or caseworker who can help you find resources, and maybe even apply for the financial assistance programs listed in this article.

All of the other tips are secondary – they will only work if you're breathing in the first place. Please use try them out and utilize what works for you and set aside what doesn't.