Six Possible Complications of COPD to Be Aware Of

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What Are the Complications of COPD?

COPD is a complex disease with a range of complications which can vary from patient to patient. In this article, I'll take a look at some common COPD complications and the warning signs to look for.

Exacerbations

There is little doubt the most significant complication COPD patients have to deal with on a regular basis is an exacerbation of their disease. While the frequency and severity may vary from patient to patient the importance of avoiding exacerbations is equally important.

An exacerbation is where your symptoms become worse. This could be a more productive cough or increased breathlessness. The cause of an exacerbation can be from a bacterial or viral infection, or environmental pollutants can be the cause. It is important to try and recognize the cause as soon as possible so you can seek the right treatment.

Early detection of a COPD exacerbation can help in reducing the length of time it will affect you. If you notice a sudden change for the worse in your symptoms, contact your doctor and refer to your COPD action plan right away.

Lung Infections

Lung infections and exacerbations go hand in hand as an infection will exacerbate your COPD. However, there are measures we can take to minimize our risk of attracting an infection. Yearly flu vaccinations as well as having a pneumonia vaccination are a must for COPD patients. While these vaccinations are no guarantee against infections, they will certainly minimize the risk.

Being mindful of the people around you is important as well. Coming into contact with people who have a cold or flu can be one way of triggering a lung infection. Personal hygiene, especially when out in public, is wise as many infections can be picked up just by coming in contact with items such as handrails.

Oxygen Saturation

A complication many patients suffer from is poor gas exchange. Our lungs carry out the function of inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. When our lungs are damaged this vital process can be disrupted, resulting in poor oxygen saturation. For me, when this happens, it often results in a headache and shortness of breath.

If you suffer from poor oxygen saturation it is likely your doctor would have you using supplementary oxygen when this happens. If you are experiencing these symptoms and have not consulted your doctor, it is important to do so immediately. Poor oxygen saturations which aren't addressed can cause damage to other organs.

Organ Damage

Continual low oxygen levels in your blood can cause hypoxemia which in turn can cause hypoxia. Hypoxia is when there is a deficiency in the amount of oxygen reaching the tissues. When our tissues aren't well-oxygenated damage can occur.

Sustaining permanent damage to our organs will often lead to other disease states which will have to be managed. Be sure to look out for symptoms of hypoxia, not only headache and shortness of breath, but a fast heart rate, sweating, and wheezing can be a sign as well.

Symptoms can vary between patients, so it's important to know your own body. If you are experiencing any changes or new symptoms, then contact your doctor immediately, better to be safe than sorry.

Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease where bones become brittle leading to a higher risk of breaks than in a normal bone. This disease occurs when bones lose minerals, such as calcium, more quickly than the body can replace them, causing a loss of bone thickness.

Osteoporosis is a significant complication in COPD patients. Tobacco smoking, systemic inflammation, vitamin D deficiency, and the use of oral or inhaled corticosteroids are responsible for its occurrence in patients with COPD.

Symptoms of osteoporosis may include back pain, loss of height over time, stooped posture or a bone fracture. Like many diseases, early detection and treatment can minimize its effects. Smoking cessation, exercise including weight-bearing and strengthening exercise as well as reducing the use of corticosteroids can help reduce the impact of osteoporosis.

In addition to this, the introduction of calcium and vitamin D supplements can be useful. Your doctor can advise you on the amounts of supplements to use.

Diabetes

Diabetes occurs when the body becomes resistant to the effects of insulin.

Symptoms may include being excessively thirsty, passing more urine, feeling tired and lethargic, always feeling hungry, weight gain, mood swings, and leg cramps. Diabetes may also cause heart attack, stroke, kidney disease, limb amputation, depression, anxiety, and blindness.

Diabetes is becoming more and more prevalent in COPD. Studies have shown the prevalence appears greater in more severe COPD stages. Some studies suggest COPD medications such as inhaled corticosteroids can contribute to the risks of developing diabetes.

While there are distinct differences between type 1 vs. type 2 diabetes, both can be helped by lifestyle changes such as diet and exercise. In the case of type 2 diabetes, there is a growing amount of evidence to suggest certain dietary and exercise strategies can reverse it.

Be Proactive

These are just some of the complications which COPD patients may have to contend with. There are many more complications both physical and mental, too many for only one article. What's important is we work with our healthcare professionals to manage these challenges correctly.

Remember, knowledge, medication, nutrition, and exercise all play a role in managing our disease and preventing any serious complications of COPD. How well you apply these four pillars will often affect your quality of life.