The Different Types of COPD Inhalers and How to Use Them Properly

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How to Use COPD Inhalers Properly To Get The Best Results

Since chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a disease affecting your respiratory system, many drugs and therapeutic agents are delivered through the respiratory route as inhalers. Many COPD inhalers are now available on the market, and you should learn how to use them properly to get optimal results.

How to Use a Peak Flow Meter

This device tells you how fast you can blow air from your lungs, using a score (called peak expiratory flow rate).

This score helps your doctor assess the severity of your disease and adjust the treatment accordingly.

1. Either sit up or stand up with a straight back.
2. The indicator of the peak flow meter should be at 0.
3. Inhale deeply, keep your lips sealed around the mouthpiece, and exhale as hard and fast as you can into the meter.
4. Check the indicator and write down the score.

Set the marker again at 0 and repeat a few more times. It is a good idea to do three blows each time you do the test, and use the best reading as the result and give that score to your doctor.

Yes, You Do Need to Use a Metered Dose Inhaler With a Spacer

You may be wondering, “Do I *really* need to use this spacer with my MDI?” Well, the answer is yes, you should! Here’s why.

Aerochambers, what we know as spacers, are basically holding chambers for the medication to be inhaled. The inhaler sprays a fine mist (the medication) directly into the inhaler, allowing us the time to inhale the mist deep into our lungs – where it needs to go to be effective.

If we use the inhaler without the spacer, it is likely the mist will spray the back of the throat instead of into the lungs. This means we’ll swallow the medication instead – and while some medications are intended to be swallowed, that albuterol is not one of them!

This does come with a caveat, of course – if you’re in an emergency situation and you need several puffs of your rescue inhaler, it is more important to use the inhaler than it is to spend the time to drive 20 minutes home to locate the spacer.

How to Use a Metered Dose Inhaler With a Spacer

This is also known as a puffer with a valved holding chamber. The spacer is a plastic tube that holds the spray from your puffer.

You have to spray the puffer into the spacer, and inhale the air from the spacer; this helps get more medicine into your lungs. When administering the medication, you have to sit or stand up and keep your back straight.

1. Remove the cap covering the spacer and the puffer, shake the puffer few times.
2. Insert the puffer into the spacer.
3. Blow your air out of the lungs and seal your lips around the mouthpiece.
4. Press the puffer to spray the drug into the spacer and then slowly breathe in from the spacer.
5. Hold your breath for five to 10 seconds, then take the mouthpiece out and breathe normally.
6. Once you finish using the puffer rinse your mouth with water and spit it out.

In case you need a second puff, wait one minute and repeat the above steps.

Dry Powder Inhalers

These devices contain the drug in powder form. For example, Turbuhaler is a dry powder inhaler that gets activated when you breathe. As you inhale, this device releases the drug, which will go deep into your lungs.

1. Sit up or stand up with your back straight.
2. Remove the cover of the device, keep it upright and turn the colored wheel one way and back the other way until you hear a click.
3. First, you have to breathe normally with your head slightly tilted back.
4. Put the mouthpiece in your mouth and breathe as deeply and strongly as you can.
5. Hold your breath for 10 seconds, remove the inhaler from your mouth, then exhale.

For additional doses, repeat the above steps. Rinse your mouth with water, then spit it out.

These are just examples on how to use common devices. Always follow the instructions of the device you are using, and ask your pharmacist any questions you may have.

Remember to Rinse Your Mouth

Certain COPD inhalers require you to rinse your mouth out with water after using them.

This is important because the powder can settle in your mouth and on your tongue, and this powder can cause thrush, a fungal infection in your mouth. Your physician will tell you if it is a required with your specific inhaler – however, it is a good practice with any inhaler.

To get into this practice, simply wait about one minute after taking your last puff of the inhaler. Rinse your mouth thoroughly. Spit the water out – do not swallow it.

Which Inhaler Should You Use First?

If you’re feeling rough and need to use your rescue inhaler at the same time as your steroid inhaler, you may be wondering which one to use first.

So, let’s play a game. Let’s pretend you use the following inhalers:

- Bronchodilator inhaler: Serevent
- Fast-acting bronchodilator inhaler: Albuterol
- Steroid inhaler: Symbicort

What one do you use first?

As a general rule of thumb, you want to use the inhalers that work the quickest first – this way; they'll open up the bronchial tubes quickly, to allow for the slower-acting inhalers to work their magic:

- Fast-acting bronchodilator inhaler
- Bronchodilator inhaler
- Steroid inhaler

So, in the case of our "game," we would use the inhalers in the following order:

- Fast-acting bronchodilator inhaler: albuterol
- Bronchodilator inhaler: Serevent
- Steroid inhaler: Symbicort

How to Take Care of Your COPD Inhalers

Each type of COPD inhaler has special cleaning instructions that should be included in the packaging materials. In general, though:

- The MDI inhalers with counters should not be taken apart. If you take the inhaler apart, you will compromise the integrity of the inhaler. Do your best to keep the mouthpiece clean. If you have an MDI without a counter, wash the mouthpiece and cap using mild soap and water twice weekly.
- Spacers should be cleaned according to packaging materials, as there are such a wide variety of spacers available.
- Diskus inhalers should always be kept dry; it can be kept clean using a clean, damp cloth.

When to Call for Help

Your COPD inhalers are there to help you breathe. If you have utilized your inhalers according to your physician's instructions and are struggling, it may be time to call for help.

Here are some guidelines for when to call 911:

- You are having any symptom that worries you, or that your physician has instructed you to seek emergency attention for.
- Experiencing sudden chest pain.
- When you are gasping for breath, having a hard time speaking, or are more short of breath than usual.
- You are too weak to stand.
- When you are having symptoms of a stroke, such as numbness and weakness on one side of the body.