How to Reduce COPD Mucus

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COPD Mucus

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is how doctors and medical professionals collectively refer to a group of progressive lung diseases that obstruct your airflow and breathing. COPD is nothing to sneeze at. With more than 15 million American adults diagnosed with COPD, it is the third most common cause of death after cancer and heart disease. The good news is that if you take a proactive approach and work with your doctor on proper management, most people with COPD are able to control their symptoms and enjoy a good quality of life while also reducing their risks of other serious health problems. One of these symptoms that many COPD patients struggle with managing is COPD mucus.

What is COPD Mucus?

Most of the early symptoms of COPD are initially missed by the person with COPD. Things like getting tired or experiencing shortness of breath are easy to attribute to other things, such as a poor night's sleep or the weather. But as your COPD progresses, so do your symptoms. Many of those early signs of COPD turn into something much more noticeable: a tightness in your chest and a heavy cough (akin to a smoker’s cough) that often includes mucus and even small specs of blood.

What Causes COPD Mucus?

Understanding why you are coughing up so much mucus starts with understanding the underlying factors.

In your lungs and airways are mucous glands and goblet cells (the types of cells that are responsible for producing mucus). If you have COPD, you have more of these glands and cells than a healthy person who does not have COPD. As these glands and cells produce mucus, the mucus triggers coughing because coughing is how your body naturally gets rid of anything that is irritating or blocking your airways.

Unfortunately, if you have COPD, your lungs are not at their strongest. This creates a weak, inefficient cough, which in turn fails to clear your airways, which in turn makes your coughing worse...and the cycle continues.

There are also additional COPD-related issues and conditions that may cause your body to produce extra mucus. This includes smoking (many people with COPD also smoke, as smoking is a high-risk factor for developing COPD) and infections (your health is compromised when you have COPD, leaving you more vulnerable to various bacterial and viral infections).

COPD Mucus Color Code

Not all mucus is the same. When you cough up some mucus, check your bathroom tissue or napkin to see what color the mucus is that you just expelled.

For most people, mucus is gray or clear. If you notice strange colors, such as bright greens or yellows, it may be a sign of an infection (i.e., bronchitis or emphysema). Discuss this with your doctor, who can conduct tests and provide treatments for any infections that may be affecting your lung health and COPD flare-ups.

You should also talk to your doctor if you notice blood, as that may be a more serious sign that something is wrong that your doctor needs to investigate.

COPD Coughing Techniques

The best way to limit discomfort and prevent more serious complications is to efficiently remove mucus from your lungs — without fatiguing your body more than you need to.

It's natural to cough when your airways are obstructed, but certain coughing methods will bring you more relief than others. Experts suggest those who suffer from COPD learn to use controlled coughing, which involves two primary techniques:

- **Deep coughing.** Rather than hack with all your might, cultivate a deep cough by first drawing a deep breath and holding it for a few seconds. When you exhale, use your stomach muscles to help you push all the air out in one smooth, forceful breath to stimulate a deep cough. The deep breath will help open your airways and loosen the mucus, and one powerful exhale will save you the effort and energy of multiple coughs.
- **Huff coughing.** This technique calls for three short, quick exhalations to loosen the mucus. Draw in a moderately deep breath, expel it in three short bursts and follow with some deep, controlled breathing to get things moving. This should make it easier to cough up the mucus.

You might find that controlled coughing is more effective at certain times of day, like when you first wake up or right after meals, so take advantage of those times to clear your airways. If coughing alone isn't helping enough, try postural drainage: lay down in horizontal or inverted positions to let gravity help clear the mucus from your lungs.

How to Manage COPD Mucus

- **Stay hydrated.** Drinking plenty of fluids can help keep your mucus thin, and it can then be easier for you to cough up and expel. You may want to consider herbal teas and warm soups, which may soothe your airways and also loosen the phlegm.
- **Consider medications.** Your doctor may recommend guaifenesin. This medication, which comes in either liquid form or pill form, is a type of expectorant. That means it helps you to cough up and get rid of mucus by thinning your mucus. Your doctor may also suggest anticholinergics, which are a group of drugs that may help to reduce how much mucus your body makes.
- **Change your posture.** Maintaining a more upright posture can help your lungs to cough more effectively. When you go to bed, you may also consider using a pillow to elevate your head, which may make coughing easier and may also make breathing easier.
- **Avoid irritants.** Minimize your exposure to anything that can irritate your airways. The first and most important thing to avoid is smoke. If you are a smoker, work with a professional to help kick the habit as quickly as possible. You may also want to consider air purifiers and filters to remove allergens, dust and other airborne irritants. A cool humidifier can also help with air quality while moistening the air to soothe your airways.
- **Avoid caffeine and alcohol.** Both can dehydrate you, which may lead to thicker mucus that is harder for you to cough out.

Tools for Better Breathing With COPD When Lifestyle Changes Won't Work

Some people produce too much mucus to clear it with coughing, but certain tools will make the task easier.

- **Flutter valve.** Many COPD sufferers use a flutter valve (it goes by the brand name Acapella), which is a

small plastic device that works with your breath to stimulate your lungs. When you breathe into the valve, a small steel ball moves up and down to vibrate your airways and provide some resistance. The idea is to breathe in and out through this valve several times, alternating between regular and slow breaths until you cultivate a productive cough.

- **The Vest System.** Although learning to work with your breath is important for managing your COPD, tapping the chest can be a powerful way to stimulate the airways. You can use your hands to do this, but you will probably find that The Vest System (or simply The Vest) is a more effective approach. It features an inflatable lining and a pump to inflate and deflate it very quickly, which puts continuous, gentle pressure on the chest wall to loosen the mucus. It’s not invasive, plus it is portable and completely safe for anyone to use.

What's Next for Your COPD Mucus Problems?

Don’t let mucus and coughing affect your quality of life and your comfort. Talk to your doctor about the above home-based treatments and create an action plan and strategy to ease your coughing, get rid of COPD mucus and help you better manage your symptoms during a COPD flare-up.