4 Simple Tips to Help You Manage Your COPD Better

by KRYSTINA OSTERMEYER

Health Tips for COPD Patients

Do you ever think that life would be easier with an instruction manual? I have often thought that, especially as it pertains to a chronic illness.

Well, my friends, here is an “instruction manual” of sorts – health tips for COPD patients, for the care of yourself!

1. Vaccines

Most adults have similar vaccination needs, though your healthcare provider may have different recommendations based on your own healthcare needs.

It is important for people with COPD to stay up to date on vaccinations, because they are more likely to suffer from complications from the flu; vaccines are also the best protection against preventable diseases.

The following vaccines are recommended:

- A yearly influenza vaccine
- Pneumococcal vaccine; schedule determined by your healthcare provider
- Tdap vaccine; schedule determined by your healthcare provider
- Zoster vaccine, which protects against shingles

2. Healthy Eating

It is important to eat a healthy diet when you have COPD. However, the diet that is right for you may not be right for your friend. This is why your healthcare provider may recommend that you visit with a registered dietitian (RD) to evaluate your needs.

According to the American Lung Association, “The right mix of nutrients in your diet can help you breathe easier. Metabolism of carbohydrates produces the most carbon dioxide for the amount of oxygen used; metabolism of fat produces the least. For some people with COPD, eating a diet with fewer carbohydrates and more fat helps them breathe easier".

If it sounds complicated — it doesn’t need to be. A registered dietitian will individualize your plan based on whether you need to gain weight, maintain weight or lose weight, as well as any other comorbidities you may have.

Here are some basic tips to get you started:

- Limit simple sugars such as candy and regular soft drinks.

- Add a protein source at meals.
- Eat about 20gm of fiber each day.
- Limit foods that contain trans fat and saturated fat, such as lard, fat from meat, hydrogenated oils, cookies and fried foods.

3. Breathing Exercises

Breathing exercises can really improve oxygenation. When you have COPD, the diaphragm doesn't work to full capacity, the lungs themselves are no longer "springy" and you've started using accessory muscles to breathe. It becomes a process just to take a breath.

Breathing exercises can help remove stale air, assist the diaphragm with functioning again and increase oxygen levels.

Here are some great breathing exercises that you can try.

4. Avoiding Triggers

Once you have identified your triggers, avoiding them can greatly improve your COPD symptoms. Each person has different triggers, so it is impossible to label a blanket recommendation. Minimizing triggers reduces exacerbations, which also potentially slows progression of the disease.

Common triggers include:

- Tobacco smoke, which is the most common cause of COPD
- Chemical fumes
- Dust
- Pet dander
- Strong odors
- Indoor pollution
- Air pollution
- Temperature extremes
- Pollen

COVID-19 and COPD

A 2020 study that evaluated 140 people with COVID-19 found that having COPD did not increase the likelihood of developing COVID-19. However, if the virus was contracted, having COPD did increase the likelihood for breathlessness, which increased the likelihood for hospitalization. Ultimately, if becoming ill, those with severe COPD may have a higher risk of severe complications.

Stress relief is important for anyone. Increased stress levels can cause a reduced immune system, hyperglycemia and hyperventilation — none of which are a good thing for someone with COPD! Here are some tips for reducing stress:

- Reduce exposure to the news. Sure, you need to stay informed, but you do not need to keep the news on 24/7. You do not need to continually check the CNN app on your smartphone. Turn off the TV. Put away your smartphone.
- Find connection. In our current climate, it is easy to become disconnected. Find a way to stay connected with family and friends, whether it is with Zoom, FaceTime, a phone call, or even a text or a written letter.
- Take the time to unwind. Listen to music that you enjoy, read a book, pull out a journal, meditate — anything that relaxes you.
- Take care of yourself. Eat a healthy diet, get enough exercise and avoid alcohol.

The Bottom Line

It is possible to practice a healthy lifestyle, even if you have COPD! Eat healthy foods, get vaccines and avoid triggers; these factors will start you on the path to a healthier life.