COPD Nutrition Tips to Help You Breathe Easier

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

Nutrition for COPD Patients

One of the lessons I've learned on my chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) journey is the important role good nutrition plays in dealing with this disease. To investigate just how good nutrition can improve your quality of life, I decided earlier this year to become a lab rat to show other patients the benefits of eating properly.

The Plan

Like many COPD patients, I know the more weight I carry the more difficult it is to breathe, so my first step was to work out what a good weight range for me would be.

After looking at the World Health Organization's BMI (body mass index) I decided falling into the mid-range of this scale (18.5 – 24.9) would be a good target. The second step was to undergo a body scan to determine my weight and current BMI as well as my fat composition.

When I started this experiment I weighed in at 74.8 kg with a BMI of 26, and I figured I would end up around 10 kilos lighter.

From the start I was interested in what effect reducing my subcutaneous and visceral fat would have on my breathing.

Subcutaneous fat is the fat found directly under your skin — think of a beer belly or flabby underarm. Visceral fat is the more dangerous of the two — it is the fat found around your organs and can cause diabetes, heart attack and stroke, among other diseases.

Food Combining

Before I started on this experiment I needed to find an eating plan I thought would best achieve my goal. After some research I decided to use a plan that had no processed foods, low dairy and matched different food groups throughout my day that fulfilled my energy requirements.

Foods are broken up into three basic categories: proteins, fats and carbohydrates.

For breakfast we combined proteins and good sources of carbs, and as I moved through the day I paired protein with fats while reducing my carb intake, as I required less energy.

I never combined good fats and carbs in a meal as it can create fat storage, something I was trying to avoid. Food pairing isn't new, but it's new to me, and once I understood how it worked meal preparation was easy.

Portion Control

Eating small portions more frequently gives our digestive system a fair chance of doing the job it was designed to do. It will kick-start metabolism as well as help with fat burning.

By eating small portions, energy levels stay even and experience fewer fluctuations in blood sugar levels, which is very important. When blood sugar levels spike, our body's ability to burn fat is compromised, which is why it's very difficult to lose weight when you're consuming food containing refined sugars.

While at first glance this eating plan may seem quite complicated, it really isn't. One of the mistakes we all make is reaching for easy foods, but unfortunately easy foods are often nutritionally poor.

So yes, eating good quality foods can sometimes take a little more time, but the benefits are well worth it. What my wife and I found is we could make up many healthy meals that could be frozen and reheated at a later time.

The Progress

After adjusting to this new eating plan it didn't take long before I started to notice a difference on the scales. I went through a period of weight loss, and then my weight would plateau. This pattern has continued right through.

It wasn't too long before my weight was down to 70 kilos and I was noticing a difference in both my daily routine and my running times.

From the start of this experiment I was training for the Gold Coast marathon, and I thought it would be interesting to compare my time for this race with my New York marathon time. With this in mind I decided to use the same training program I did for the New York race.

My first milestone run was a half marathon in my hometown of Brisbane. My training runs had been very encouraging, but race day doesn't always reflect my training.

I was hoping to run around two hours 45 minutes for the race, which for me is quick. It came as a pleasant surprise when I crossed the finish line in two hours 42 minutes — a new personal best. This certainly gave me plenty of motivation to continue down the experimental journey I was on.

My second body scan had produced some positive results with the loss of 4.25 kg of visceral fat. This had resulted in my body now coming into the healthy/normal BMI range of 24.6.

I had gained a small amount of lean mass and my bone density had increased slightly.

By this stage I was 10 weeks into my new eating plan and things were going well. I had plenty of energy during the day and had noticed I wasn't as breathless as I normally would have been.

One of the pleasing parts of the eating plan is it has been sustainable. I find the foods and recipes are enjoyable, and I have no craving for sugar or any other processed food.

The Grand Finale

By the time the Gold Coast marathon came around, I felt amazing. I had my final body scan three days prior to the race and what a difference: a loss of 7.1 kilos of visceral fat, an increase in lean body mass and a BMI of 23.2.

This result was what I was hoping for — especially the loss in visceral fat, as I was confident this alone would improve my day-to-day life, as well as my run times. My overall weight had dropped to 64.4 kilos, a reduction of 10 kilos.

I also had pulmonary function testing carried out prior to race day, with the results being similar to past test (my FEV1 was 27%).

How Did It Go?

I ran the Gold Coast marathon in 5 hours 31 minutes — 34 minutes quicker than the New York marathon and a personal best.

What I haven't told you was that, due to hot and humid weather conditions, my training kilometers had been around 25 percent fewer than planned.

For me this plan had been a success — controlled weight loss with good nutrition and exercise had resulted in an improvement in my quality of life. While the experiment is now over, my eating plan hasn't changed; I enjoy how we eat now and will continue with this plan unless I find something better.

If you're reading this thinking, "I'm not capable of walking fast, let alone running," don't despair. The point of this experiment was to demonstrate if you eat good quality, nutritious foods and avoid processed foods, you can expect more energy, which will allow you to be more active and give you a better quality of life.