4 Tips for Avoiding COPD Flare-Ups

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How to Avoid COPD Flares

With any chronic condition, you have periods of time where you feel okay – maybe not great, but you can get by and live your life in a fairly normal way. But then all of a sudden, something changes in your life and your condition worsens. You're all of a sudden not feeling okay anymore. This is why knowing how to avoid COPD flares is important.

With any chronic condition, these ebbs and flows are miserable. They can be exhausting, painful, maddening, frustrating… (fill in the adjective that describes how you are feeling here). But when you have COPD, when your COPD flares, it can be life-threatening.

For this reason, it is of the utmost importance to avoid a COPD flare, or exacerbations, at all costs. Here are some tips for preventing a COPD exacerbation.

1. Take Your Medication as Prescribed

This sounds oh-so-simple, and for many of you, this advice may be a filler in this article – something that seems common sense. However, many people do not take their medications as prescribed.

Why? There are several factors. One of the top reasons is cost. It has been estimated that once someone is diagnosed with COPD, there is a 9% reduction in the likelihood of employment, as well as a 4% increase in the probability of collecting Social Security Disability insurance. That, coupled with the high cost of medications, as well as possible hospitalizations, can equate to a reduction in medication compliance. Why? Because the patient simply cannot afford their medications.

If you are having a hard time taking your medication exactly as prescribed, know that your risk of an exacerbation is increased. Speak with your physician about changing your regimen to something more affordable, or ask for a referral to a social worker or caseworker who can help you figure out resources to make your medications more affordable.

2. Ensure That You Are Taking Your Inhalers Correctly

Even if you are adhering to the correct schedule, if you are not utilizing your inhaler correctly, you are not getting your medication.

If you are not getting your medication, you are increasing your risk of an exacerbation. There was a demonstration in a research study evaluating 316 asthma and COPD patients; they were observed utilizing their inhalers. Of the 316 patients, 89% performed at least one error in technique.

Part of the problem is that there are a variety of different types of inhalers on the market. If your doctor continually

switches your prescription, it can be difficult to memorize the inhalation instructions. Ask for written instructions for your physician or pharmacist.

3. Avoid Your Triggers

The amount of COPD triggers is vast. If you have not figured them out already, over time, you will come to know what triggers your symptoms. It is in your best interest to avoid your triggers.

However, some triggers are unavoidable. For example, you may notice that specific weather patterns trigger your symptoms. Unfortunately, avoiding the weather is not feasible! In the same vein, air pollution is another common trigger, and despite your best efforts, it is also difficult to avoid air pollution. Exposure to allergens is also a trigger for some people, such as pollens, dust and mold.

There are triggers that you can avoid, however. Everyone with COPD has triggers that are unique to them. We know of multiple triggers that are likely to trigger an exacerbation, but the trigger may cause an issue in one person, but may not cause a problem in another person.

Common triggers include smoke – whether it is smoking or second-hand smoke and strong scents, such as perfumes and other scented products. Smelling strong chemical fumes can also trigger symptoms, and this can include cleaning chemicals, paints and other solvents that may be used at work. If you have a pet, unfortunately, pet dander may be a trigger for some people.

4. Avoid Illness

Although it may seem difficult during the winter months, avoiding illness can prevent a COPD exacerbation. Therefore it stands to reason that taking steps to prevent illness in the first place will also prevent a COPD exacerbation from occurring.

What steps can you take to stay healthy? Well, frequent washing your hands is one thing! Wash your hands with soap and warm water often; using hand sanitizer is also acceptable when you cannot wash your hands.

Get immunizations as recommended by your physician. Typically, this includes an influenza vaccine each fall or early winter. Your physician will also recommend a pneumococcal vaccine at some point, which provides immunity against certain bacteria that cause pneumonia.

Keep in mind that vaccines do their best to protect against infections, but they are not 100% effective. You can still get influenza or pneumonia, but you are more likely to get less sick if you have been vaccinated.

It is also important to stay away from sick people. Unfortunately, this can be disheartening, especially as winter also is the holiday season. Keep in mind, though, that you are keeping yourself healthy! This also means that you should avoid large crowds (where there may be lots of sick people!) whenever possible.

Also, sleep is important. Rest up – if you are not well rested, you are more likely to get sick.

When to Seek Medical Attention…

If you have been taking your medications as recommended, avoid COPD flares and triggers and have done what you can to prevent illness, and it seems that your COPD is flaring up, you should act quickly.

At the first sign of your COPD flaring up, contact your physician. They will let you know if your flare-up can be treated at home, or whether you need to seek emergency medical attention. If it is after office hours, or if your symptoms are severe, seek emergency medical attention right away. Call 911 immediately.