

# Smart Thinking for Patients With COPD

**C**hronic obstructive pulmonary disease, like a force of nature, can't really be stopped. But if a hurricane was coming your way, you wouldn't just sit around twiddling your thumbs, right?

Odds are you would board up the windows, pack up the china, and so forth in your best effort to minimize the damage. It's to your benefit to approach COPD in the same way. You can take measures to reduce the risk of exacerbations — serious symptom flare-ups that can land you in the hospital and lead to debilitating or even fatal complications.

## Knowing symptoms and triggers

For starters, you should know the symptoms of an exacerbation, so that you'll recognize when you're actually having one. Symptoms include increased or prolonged breathlessness, coughing, sputum (mucus) production, wheezing, chest tightness, and fever. Keep track of how many and how severe your symptoms are, and share this information with your physician. A simple breathing test called spirometry can help to determine if your lung function is declining.

In addition, you should become aware of what aggravates your COPD. Evidence suggests 80 percent of COPD exacerbations are infectious in origin, so practice good hand hygiene, and avoid people with colds or other respiratory illnesses.<sup>1</sup> Make sure you get your annual flu shot because the vaccine can decrease serious complications and death in COPD



patients by as much as 50 percent.<sup>2</sup> Ask your physician if you're a good candidate for the pneumonia vaccine as well.

Pollution is another major trigger of exacerbations for people with COPD, so minimize exposure to environmental irritants such as dust, chemicals, and secondhand smoke. Stay inside on high ozone days.

## Healthy living

Proactive approaches like a balanced diet, a good night's sleep, and maintaining a healthy weight are good ideas for anyone, but they can be especially valuable to COPD patients who want to improve their quality of life. It's also wise to make an effort to keep your emotions in check, because depression and anxiety can lead to a higher frequency of exacerbations.<sup>3</sup>

Exercise in the form of pulmonary rehabilitation is suggested for people looking to avoid exacerbation relapse because pulmonary function declines after each

episode. Staying active can help strengthen the muscles you use to breathe.

But the most important lifestyle change you can make is to quit smoking to slow the progression of lung inflammation that causes COPD.

## Managing therapies

Following the medication plan prescribed by your doctor is another simple way to manage your disease. Take your maintenance medications daily to keep symptoms under control and reduce your need for rescue medications. If you use supplemental oxygen, be sure that you're using the appropriate levels prescribed for periods of activity and rest.

Remember, despite your best efforts to prevent them, COPD exacerbations are common and can occur suddenly. Be sure to know how and when to use your rescue medications, and go to the emergency room if necessary. ■

## References

1. Soto FJ, Varkey B. Evidence-based approach to acute exacerbations of COPD. *Curr Opin Pulm Med.* 2003; 9(2):117-24.
2. Trendel D. What is a COPD exacerbation. About.com. July 2008. Available from <http://copd.about.com/od/copd/a/copdexac.htm>.
3. Xu W, Collet J, Shapiro S, Lin Y, Yang T, Platt RW, et al. Independent effect of depression and anxiety on chronic obstructive pulmonary disease exacerbations and hospitalizations. *Am J Respir Crit Care Med.* 2008;178(9):913-20.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. It is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

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