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COPD Health Center

COPD and Exercise: Breathing and Exercise Programs for COPD

If you have trouble breathing, exercise may be the last thing you feel like doing. But exercises for COPD can help your breathing, allowing you to stay as active as possible and improving your quality of life. Before beginning with a COPD exercise program, be sure to talk with your doctor or other health care provider.

How Exercises for COPD Can Help You

Exercise -- especially exercise that works your lungs and heart -- has many benefits for those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Exercise can:

- Improve how well your body uses oxygen, which is important since people with COPD use more energy to breathe than other people do.
- Decrease your symptoms and improve your breathing.
- Strengthen your heart, lower your blood pressure, and improve your circulation.
- Improve your energy, making it possible to stay more active.
- Improve your sleep and make you feel more relaxed.
- Help you maintain a healthy weight.
- Enhance your mental and emotional outlook.
- Reduce your social isolation, if you exercise with others.
- Strengthen your bones.

4 Types of Exercises for COPD

These four types of exercises can help you if you have COPD. How much you focus on each type of exercise may depend upon the COPD exercise program your health care providers suggests for you. Before starting these programs speak with your health care provider.

Stretching exercises lengthen your muscles, increasing your flexibility. Stretching can also help prepare your muscles for other types of exercise, decreasing your chance of injury.

Aerobic exercises use large muscle groups to move at a steady, rhythmic pace. This type of exercise works your heart and lungs, improving their endurance by working your respiratory muscles. This helps your body use oxygen more efficiently and, with time, can improve your breathing. Walking and using a stationary bike are two good choices of aerobic exercise if you have COPD.

Strengthening exercises involve tightening muscles repeatedly to the point of fatigue. When you do this for the upper body, it can help increase the strength of your breathing muscles.

Breathing exercises for COPD help you strengthen breathing muscles, get more oxygen, and breathe with less effort. Here are two examples of breathing exercises you can begin doing for five to 10 minutes, three to four times a day.

Pursed lip breathing:

1. Relax your neck and shoulder muscles.
2. Breathe in for two seconds through your nose, keeping your mouth closed.
3. Breathe out for four seconds through pursed lips. If this is too long for you, simply breathe out twice as long as you breathe in.

Use pursed-lip breathing while exercising. If you experience shortness of breath, first try slowing your rate of breathing and focus on breathing out through pursed lips.

Diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Lie on your back with knees bent. You can put a pillow under your knees for support.
2. Place one hand on your belly below your rib cage. Place the other hand on your chest.
3. Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 3. (Your belly and lower ribs should rise, but your chest should remain still.)
4. Tighten your stomach muscles and exhale for a count of 6 through slightly puckered lips.

COPD and Exercise Guidelines

You may find that it helps to exercise at the same time each day; late morning or early afternoon may be a time when you have more energy. Here are some other basic guidelines for exercise when you have COPD:

Set realistic goals.

Gradually increase the number of minutes and days you exercise. A good goal is to exercise 20 to 40 minutes, two to four times a week.

Start out slow. Warm up for a few minutes.

Choose activities you enjoy, but vary them to help you stay motivated.

Find an exercise partner.

Keep a record of your exercise to help you stay on track.

As you end your exercise, cool down by moving more slowly.

COPD and Exercise Precautions

It's good to take precautions when exercising with COPD, but remember that shortness of breath doesn't always mean you should stop altogether. Instead, slow down and continue exercising. If shortness of breath becomes severe, then stop exercising.

Here are other exercise precautions:

Always consult a doctor or other health care provider before starting a COPD exercise program. If you have a change in any medications, talk to your doctor before continuing with your exercise routine.

Balance exercise with rest. If you feel tired, start at a lower level. If you feel very tired, rest and try again the next day.

Wait at least one and a half hours after eating before beginning to exercise.

Remember any fluid restrictions you have when you drink fluids while exercising.

Avoid hot or cold showers after exercising.

If you've been away from exercise for several days, start up slowly and gradually return to your regular routine.

Exercises to avoid when you have COPD:

Heavy lifting or pushing.

Chores such as shoveling, mowing, or raking.

Push-ups or sit-ups or isometric exercises, which involve pushing against immovable objects.

Outdoor exercises when the weather is very cold, hot, or humid.

Walking up steep hills.

Ask your doctor whether exercises like weight lifting, jogging, or swimming are OK for you to do when you have COPD.

COPD and Exercise: When to Stop

If you experience any of these signs or symptoms, stop your COPD exercise program right away. Sit down and keep your feet raised while resting. If you don't feel better quickly, call your doctor.

Nausea

Dizziness

Weakness

Rapid or irregular heart beat

Severe shortness of breath

Pain

Pressure or pain in your chest or your arm, neck, jaw, or shoulder

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WebMD Medical Reference

SOURCES: American Association for Respiratory Care: "Exercising Safely with COPD." Cleveland Clinic Health System: "COPD Exercise and Activity Guidelines," "Diaphragmatic Breathing," "COPD Exercise Precautions." University of Michigan Health System: "Breathing Exercises."

Reviewed by [Brunilda Nazario, MD](#) on January 22, 2009

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