COPD: Exercise and Thrive

You might think it’s impossible to exercise when you have a disease that can leave you winded, but moving your body can actually help you breathe better with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

When people have COPD and shortness of breath, their bodies gradually become less fit from being inactive. Exercise helps offset this. It doesn’t cure breathing problems, but it can help you live better with COPD. Exercise may help improve your fitness level and make your body stronger. This may help you to feel better, breathe easier, and move around better too.

**SLOW, STEADY AND SAFE**

If you have COPD and want to be more active, your first move should be talking with your doctor to find out how you can safely begin an exercise program. Start slowly and try the activities your doctor recommends. Walking is often a good way to exercise. And if you can only walk a few minutes at a time, that’s a start! From there, you might gradually try to walk a little longer each time. If you can’t get out and about, you might even be able to exercise in your home.

No matter what activities you do, try to keep up your healthy routine. Aim for about three days a week.

Another way to exercise with COPD? Ask your doctor for a referral to pulmonary rehab. Rehab programs teach people with breathing problems, like COPD, to be more active and manage their disease. In pulmonary rehab, medical teams monitor and supervise the exercise to make sure it is safe and does the most good.

*Sources: American Thoracic Society; COPD Foundation*

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Pharmacy Corner

Do you struggle to inhale your rescue medication? Some people with COPD cannot inhale strongly enough to benefit from their rescue inhaler. If you feel this may be a problem for you, talk to your doctor. They can order a spirometry or lung function test that can help determine the best medication options for you.

*Sources: Your Respiratory Resource*  
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Three Breathing Techniques

The breathing techniques explained here can help during physical exercise or at other times when you feel out of breath or need to relax. Practice them regularly, even when you feel fine. You’ll get better at them, and the practice may even help prevent shortness of breath.

PURSED-LIP BREATHING

**WHY?** This technique helps temporarily raise your oxygen level. It helps you relax and improves your ability to exercise.

**WHEN?** Practice pursed-lip breathing when you’re exercising or exerting yourself in any way. Do it whenever you feel tense or out of breath.

**HOW?** In this technique, the key is making sure you’re breathing OUT for a longer time than you’re breathing IN. Here are the steps:

1. Relax your shoulder and neck muscles. Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of 2.
2. With your lips puffed (pursed) like you’re whistling, breathe out slowly through your mouth for 4 to 6 seconds.

BELLY BREATHING (ALSO CALLED DIAPHRAGMATIC BREATHING)

**WHY?** In this technique, your stomach (belly) muscles help your diaphragm move air in and out of your lungs more easily.

**WHEN?** Practice belly breathing two times a day, along with pursed-lip breathing. Also use this breathing technique any time you feel short of breath or tense.

**HOW?** The steps below show you how to combine belly breathing with the pursed-lip technique:

1. Sit in a comfortable position, and relax your shoulder and neck muscles. With one hand on your stomach and one hand on your chest, breathe in through your nose to the count of 2. Think of “breathing into” your belly—feel your stomach muscles relax and push out. Your chest shouldn’t move much.
2. Tighten your stomach muscles and breathe out through pursed lips to a count of 4. (As your stomach muscles tighten, they will go in and up.) Again, keep your chest still.

Concerned about COVID-19?

For updates and information, please visit Intermountainhealthcare.org
CONTROlLED COUGHING  
(HUFF COUGHING)

Why? Coughing helps rid your lungs of mucus. So coughing is helpful—but it’s also tiring. This technique show you how to cough in a way that conserves your energy.

WHEN? Use this technique whenever you need to cough.

HOW? Follow these steps:

1. Sit comfortably in a chair. Take several slow breaths, using the belly breathing and pursed-lip techniques described above. Then take in a normal breath and lean forward slightly from the waist.

2. Make two short, sharp coughs, squeezing with your stomach muscles to help force out the air. (The first cough loosens the mucus, and the second clears it upward.) Your cough may make a “huff” sound.

3. Breathe lightly as you rest. (A big breath right after coughing might suck the mucus back into your lungs.)

Sleep Apnea and COPD

UNDERSTANDING THE CONNECTION

Do family members complain about your snoring? Do you fight sleepiness during the day? Are you bothered by morning headaches?

These are all warning signs of Obstructive Sleep Apnea (OSA), a serious sleep disorder that often goes hand-in-hand with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).

People with OSA stop breathing for 10 seconds or longer at a time while they’re asleep. These pauses may occur 30 or more times in an hour, and they disrupt sleep. Typically, normal breathing starts again after one of these pauses, sometimes with a loud snore or choking sound.

If not treated, OSA can make your COPD worse and trigger flare-ups. OSA is also a serious condition by itself that can raise your risk for high blood pressure and heart disease.

GET HELP

That’s why it’s so important to see your healthcare provider if there’s any chance you have OSA. Treatment can help you sleep peacefully.

That treatment is likely to be Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP). You’ll wear a special mask while you’re asleep that’s hooked up to a machine that gently blows air into your throat. This helps keep your airways from being blocked—a common cause of OSA.

Sources: American Thoracic Society; National Institutes of Health; National Sleep Foundation
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