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Family Caregiver Resources

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Living with COPD

Preventing flare-ups



Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) thickens airways, making it harder to breathe in and get enough oxygen. Damage to the lungs also makes it harder to exhale and get rid of waste gas (carbon dioxide).

COPD is characterized by flare-ups that rather suddenly make breathing much more difficult. Often the patient needs to go to the Emergency Room.

Every flare-up has the potential to make the disease get worse at a faster rate.

Here's what you can do to prevent a flare:

Aim for quality air.

- **No smoking.** If your loved one smokes, he or she has already been told to quit. Ask visitors and other family members not to smoke in the house.
- **Reduce exposure to common irritants.** Keep the house well ventilated and free of dust, animal hair, and other allergens. Strong fumes, such as those in cleansers and paints, should also be avoided.
- **Limit exposure to outdoor pollution.** Check for local air quality at epa.gov/airnow. Stay indoors when the pollution level is high.

Beware of infections.

 Any cold or respiratory infection can cause a flare.

- **Stay current on vaccinations.** Make sure your relative keeps up with flu and pneumonia vaccines.
- **Avoid crowds.** During flu season, your loved one should avoid public places. Ask friends to be mindful of their own health before visiting.
- **Wash hands frequently.** Fingers and hands collect bacteria from everything! Have your relative avoid touching his or her eyes, mouth, and nose. Bring a personal pen for use in stores, at the doctor's, etc. Carry hand sanitizer or wipes.
- **See the dentist regularly.** Good dental hygiene helps protect against infection.

Promote overall health. Getting adequate sleep is important for a person with COPD. So is getting enough exercise. Walking is recommended. But talk with the doctor first. There are special lung-friendly activities designed for persons with COPD.



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COPD warning signs



“Flares” or “exacerbations” are common with COPD. Breathing suddenly becomes more difficult. It can be very frightening and often results in a dash to the Emergency Room.

It’s important to know the early signs of a flare and to have an action plan. If you know the signs and what to do, chances are good for managing the condition at home. Plus you skip the stress and cost of trips to the emergency room!

Develop a personalized action plan with your relative’s health care provider. They may even have classes or nurse educators to help. Ask what you should do if your loved one shows changes such as these:

- Feeling more breathless than usual
- Extreme fatigue
- More coughing, with thicker phlegm or mucus
- Needing to use a quick-relief “rescue” inhaler or nebulizer more often
- Weight gain of three pounds or more in a day’s time. This may be due to fluid buildup. Check for increased swelling around the ankles.
- Inability to sleep well because of breathing or coughing difficulties
- Lack of appetite

Plan with the doctor what steps to take to address these symptoms. The doctor may suggest

- special medications
- special breathing exercises
- increased oxygen

Have these on hand and ready for use at the first sign of a flare. Call the doctor immediately if these treatments don’t help and the condition seems to be getting worse.

Sing a song for COPD

People with COPD have trouble breathing. They often take quick, gaspy breaths, trying to get enough air. Recent research indicates music therapy can help.

The constant breathlessness of COPD causes anxiety, as well as trouble sleeping and deep fatigue. And because of difficulty getting out and about, people with COPD often become socially isolated. It’s not surprising that 50% of people with COPD are depressed.

At its core, COPD is a problem with exhaling. COPD patients are so anxious about getting enough new air that they focus too little on getting rid of the “old air.” As a result, they feel starved of oxygen.

Here’s where singing comes in. Both singers and musicians who play wind instruments learn to control their breathing. People with respiratory conditions can do specific exercises to gain the same control. But they can be tiring.

The key may be music therapy. Studies in the United States and in England have shown that patients with respiratory disease who participate in weekly music therapy improve their lung capacity, feel less fatigued, and become less depressed.

In some sessions, the patients sing. In others they play penny whistles or recorders.

When we sing, it appears we are so engaged with the words and the music that the breathing becomes secondary. Without the person thinking about it, the lungs get exercise and develop muscles and capacity to exhale more fully. As one participant observed, “When you’ve got COPD, breathing is on your mind all the time. But strangely, I don’t notice it when I’m singing. I can hold a note for ages.”

So whether your loved one is a natural Sinatra or can’t carry a tune in a bucket, ask the doctor if singing might be an appropriate pastime. What’s not to love about breathing exercises that are fun?

Contact us at 707.477.0700



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