

## Health and Wellness Tips – October/November 2015

### Managing Chronic Illness: COPD

COPD is a condition that affects the lungs and airways. It stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. “Chronic” meaning long term. It is something you will have the rest of your life, but it is manageable. Two main diseases cause the “Obstruction” in COPD.

1. Chronic Bronchitis: excess mucous blocks the airways and the lining of these airways become inflamed and irritate causing their muscles to spasm. A cough with mucous that lasts 3 months for 2 years in a row may be chronic bronchitis.
2. Emphysema: affects the air sacs in the lungs, called alveoli. The alveoli become enlarged and the walls are stretched thin, making them unable to “spring back” to normal size allowing “stale” air to remain in the lung. This makes it difficult for fresh air to enter the sacs and bloodstream.

#### **CAUSES OF COPD:**

80-90% of all COPD is caused by smoking. A small percentage is caused by inhaling second hand smoke for a long period of time. A small number of people are genetically predisposed to emphysema so that their lungs are less able to protect against damage to the air sacs.

Other risk factors include air pollution exposure, exposure to hazardous substances in the air like dust, chemicals, asbestos, and having Asthma.

#### **SYMPTOMS OF COPD:**

Shortness of breath, cough producing sputum, wheezing. Your doctor will ask about these symptoms during a health visit. If you answer yes to having these symptoms, he will order chest X-Rays and PFTs (Pulmonary Function Tests) to check for lung damage.

#### **MANAGING YOUR SHORTNESS OF BREATH:**

Pursed lip breathing: Inhale deeply through your nose (with mouth closed) like smelling the flowers and exhale through lips pursed like you are blowing out a candle.

Diaphragmatic breathing: Also known as belly breathing. Place hand one hand on your belly and the other on your chest. Inhale through your nose. As you exhale let your belly and hand move out. Keep your upper chest relaxed. The hand on your chest should not move. Purse your lips in a whistling position and exhale slowly. Your belly and hand should move in. Try to exhale twice as long as you inhaled. This will strengthen your diaphragm which will help decrease your shortness of breath (SOB).

Relaxation: SOB=anxiety= ^ SOB=panic- etc., etc., Try Yoga, positive imagery, (picture yourself in a pleasant place), alternating tensing and relaxing your muscles. All of the above breathing exercises will also help you to relax.

Clearing mucous: Cough. This keeps the airways open and clears mucous from the lungs, making it easier to breath.

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#### **AVOID TRIGGERS:**

STOP SMOKING!!!! Smoking cessation slows the progression of COPD. Prevent infections. Avoid people with colds, sore throats or the flu. Get a flu shot every year. Get the pneumonia vaccine if your doctor recommends it. Get exercises, eat well and drink plenty of fluids. WASH YOUR HANDS frequently. Air pollution, inside or outside, and trigger shortness of breath or infection. Avoid traffic jams, smoke, strong chemicals, aerosol sprays and stay indoors during air pollution alerts. Weather- cold air strains your lungs and can cause airways to constrict. When outside in cold weather always wear a scarf that covers your nose and mouth.

#### **TO MANAGE YOUR DISEASE:**

**Nutrition:** Good nutrition keeps your body strong and healthy. To prevent shortness of breath while eating: Try 6 small meals instead of 3 large ones. Select easy to prepare foods to save energy. Eat slowly. Avoid gas producing foods.

**Oxygen:** If your oxygen levels are low your doctor may prescribe supplemental oxygen for you. Always follow the doctors' instructions on how and when to use it.

**Exercise:** You can build up your body and get into better shape with exercise. It will condition your muscles to be more efficient. Walking is good exercise, done at your own pace. Before starting any exercise program talk with your doctor. Most hospitals offer Pulmonary Rehabilitation programs. Ask your doctor if these programs are right for you to help build your endurance.

**Medicines:** Always take EXACTLY as directed by your doctor. Bronchodilators: open airways to increase air flow. (Inhalers, nebulizers or pills) Steroids: can reduce inflammation. (Inhalers, pills, injections, IV, liquids). Expectorants: helps clear mucous by making it thinner and easier to clear. (Pills, liquids). Antibiotics: Used to treat infections caused by bacteria. Always take exactly as directed for as long as directed. Don't stop them just because you feel better. Follow up visits: Keep all appointments with your doctor to monitor your disease process.

#### **WHEN SHOULD YOU SEEK HELP?**

Your mucous changes color, consistency and/or amount. Your wheeze, cough or shortness of breath gets worse or is not helped by your 'rescue' medicine. Your breathing gets difficult. You have trouble walking or talking.

**CALL 911! If you get confused. You have trouble staying awake. Your lips or fingernails turn blue or gray.**

#### **Resources:**

American Lung Association- 60 Broadway, 6<sup>th</sup> floor, NYC, NY 10006

University of Pittsburgh Medical School, Pittsburgh, PA. [www.upmc.org](http://www.upmc.org)