



Exercise, COPD and Me



This guide has been adapted from 'COPD & Me' with kind permission from our partners in COPD Support Ireland.

“I wouldn’t be able to exercise. It makes me too breathless.

Wouldn’t exercise make me worse?”

It’s very normal to feel this way if you’re short of breath with COPD. Exercise, done in a safe way, is one of the best things you can do to improve your breathlessness. Many people with COPD find that being breathless is the hardest part of their condition to deal with. Breathlessness can cause people to do less and less activities.

“The less you do, the less you are able to do.”

This can lead to your muscles becoming weaker and eventually it can become difficult to do much at all.

What happens if I don’t exercise?



“It may come as a surprise but breathlessness when you exercise is good for you” - It is a normal response to activity. Breathlessness may occur more easily and more often when you have COPD but that does not mean that activity should be avoided.

Weaker muscles need more oxygen to work. Exercising regularly can make your muscles stronger so that they need less oxygen to do the same amount of work. If you avoid activity that makes you breathless then muscles may weaken and this can cause more breathlessness.

Exercise cannot cure COPD, but it can change how you manage and experience your breathlessness, improve fitness levels and improve your quality of life. It has a positive effect on both your physical and mental wellbeing.

It is important that you pace yourself, but the more you do the more that you will be able to do.



Tips for Safe Exercise

- Please consult your health care professional before starting any new exercise regime
- Do not exercise if you feel unwell
- Drink plenty of water throughout the day
- You should be able to talk but not sing whilst exercising
- Stop the exercise if you become too breathless

Saving your Energy

Saving your energy is changing the way you do activities to reduce the amount of energy needed. To be able to do this you will need to plan your day by keeping a balance of work, rest and play. This is called conserving energy. To conserve energy, follow the 4 P's:

Prioritise

- Make a list of what you have to do
- Place the task in order of importance, into what you need to do, want to do and should do.
- Get rid of any unnecessary tasks
- Decide if someone else can do some tasks for you
- Change between light and heavy tasks.

Pacing

- Work at a slow steady pace
- Allow plenty of time for rest and relaxation, at least 5 – 10 minutes every hour
- Use breathlessness as a guide
- Space difficult and heavy tasks evenly throughout the week.

There are many supports available to help you to stop. (1)

Avoiding flare ups: recognise your symptoms; know what is usual for you. Monitor your symptoms and make sure you know when you may need to change your medication or start treatment early for flare ups. You should know when and how to seek help. You can discuss this with your healthcare professional using a COPD Self-Management Plan to guide you (Section 6, COPD & Me Information Booklet).

Breathing exercises use controlled breathing techniques and chest and clearing phlegm: clearance techniques to help you get rid of phlegm and also help with relaxation techniques (Section 6.3 & 6.4).

Exercise: regular exercise is important – even a small amount of exercise helps. Exercise contributes to improving your general feeling of wellbeing. It can also help you sleep better at night and it is very good in strengthening or maintaining strength in the big muscle groups (Section 5).

Food & Nutrition: try to eat a well-balanced diet, eating little and often rather than having big meals. Try to maintain a healthy weight. Ensure you drink plenty of fluids, particularly during a flare up (Section 7).

Vaccinations: It is important that you get the flu vaccine every year and a pneumonia vaccination – your healthcare professional will tell you how often you need this and may also recommend other vaccines for you (Section 6.8).

Relaxation techniques: relaxation techniques can help with breathlessness, feelings of anxiety or during times of a flare up.

Rest: ensure you get good sleep and plenty of rest particularly during times of a flare up.

Equipment: if you are using any medical equipment, for example nebulisers or oxygen, please ensure they are serviced regularly, and that masks, mouthpieces and filters are cleaned and changed often.

Triggers: know what it is that can trigger an exacerbation or flare up and how to avoid these. For example, avoid smoky environments and pollutants like dust, smog, or foggy weather.

Bone health: As we get older we are at risk of osteoporosis which is a weakening of the bone. A number of factors contribute to osteoporosis in people with COPD. These can be monitored with your doctor and there are many things you can do to improve and maintain bone health. Exercise and vitamin supplements can be discussed with your healthcare professional.



Planning

- Change the activities to keep the energy you use low to do the job
- Sit rather than stand when possible, use a perching or high stool when possible
- Organise yourself, your home and your working environment
- Put items you frequently use in an easy to reach place
- Consider using a bag or basket to carry things
- Plan tasks around when help is available and when your energy levels are high.

Posture

- Push or pull objects, rather than lifting
- Use your legs, not your back
- Use your strongest, largest joints
- Keep your arm movements at a low rate
- Avoid bending, reaching or twisting

Reference:

COPD & Me Information Booklet:

copd.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COPD-Me-Booklet-2021.pdf