How Breathing Exercises for COPD Can Help

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Tips to Strengthen Your Airways and Reinforce Your Lungs

Living with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is often uncomfortable, especially when you feel short of breath.

Without easy breathing, your energy suffers, your mobility drops, and your mind wanders to worst case scenarios. It makes good sense to do anything in your power to encourage better breathing.

Breathing exercises should take center stage in your COPD management plan, and the keys to improvement are persistence, form, and patience.

Why Good Breathing Is Crucial for Healing

Feeling breathless is a terrible sensation, and it tends to feed a terrible cycle: once you begin to gasp for air you get anxious, and anxiety constricts your chest muscles and speeds up heart rate. In turn, your breath becomes even shallower and your anxiety rises.

Breathlessness can also bring immobility, which prompts another damaging cycle: when walking becomes uncomfortable due to shortness of breath, you opt out of exercise, and the longer you go without exercise, the weaker your muscles get.

Weak muscles demand more oxygen to function, so any amount of activity will get more and more difficult, and your lungs, airways and cardiovascular system will suffer even more.

The Best Breathing Exercises for COPD

Breathing seems pretty simple: in, out, in, out, and repeat. But when you live with compromised lungs, that simple action can become a lot more difficult. In some circumstances, you'll need to make a conscious effort to get the most out of every breath.

Although you can't regain perfect lung function, you can retrain your airways to operate more efficiently. Strong airways will be able to push mucus out quickly, and stronger surrounding muscles will make breathing easier. These two breathing exercises will likely bring the greatest benefit:

Pursed-Lip Breathing

This is one of the most immediately rewarding exercises you can do. It will slow your breathing down, keep your airways open longer, and bump up your level of exertion. It's also a very simple technique:

1. Breathe in through the nose to the count of two

2. Pucker your lips to make a small opening at the center of your mouth
3. Breathe out through your pursed lips to the count of four or five — that's at least twice as long as your inhale
4. Repeat the process

This technique is particularly helpful for emphysema-prevalent COPD, which makes the airways collapse. The pressure created in the airways during the exhale helps to prevent them from collapsing and obstructing breathing.

Belly Breathing

Drawing breath deep into your abdomen can help you power through difficult breathing, but it does rely on abdominal strength and willpower. The technical term is "diaphragmatic breathing" since you're pulling air down into your body rather than relying on the muscles in your neck, shoulders and back to force air in and out of your lungs.

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1. Lie on your back, with one hand on your belly, taking some time to relax your shoulders
2. Inhale through your nose to the count of two, inflating your belly and lower ribs more than your upper chest
3. Slowly breathe out through pursed lips for twice as long as your inhale, gently pushing on your belly to release all the stale air
4. Repeat the process

This technique requires a good deal of focus and muscle control in the upper abdomen to retrain your diaphragm to do more of the work. It will be helpful to recruit the help of a respiratory therapist or your doctor to make sure you have the proper form.

Belly breathing can also be performed lying down. Although not everyone with COPD will find this comfortable, practicing belly breathing while lying down can strengthen the diaphragm while also promoting relaxation – both advantageous if you have COPD.

If you'd like to practice belly breathing while lying down, pick up a one to two-pound bag of rice or a book and place it on your abdomen. Practice the breathing technique listed below for five to 15 minutes. The weight can be increased to five to 10 pounds.

Next Page: Breathe better with more breathing exercises for COPD, including coordinated breathing, the huff cough technique, and more.

Coordinated Breathing

It's no secret that when you become short of breath, you become anxious. And when you become anxious, you become more short of breath because you may hold your breath.

Practicing coordinated breathing not only improves your breathing, but it can reduce anxiety. It can also help when you are exercising – because you know that you should be, right?

Here are the steps to practice coordinated breathing:

1. Inhale through the nose. If you're exercising, inhale through the nose prior to the exercise
2. Purse the lips
3. Exhale through the lips. If you're exercising, inhale through the lips during the most challenging part of the

exercise
4. Repeat

This type of breathing technique is great for everyone, not just people suffering from COPD. It can be used for people suffering from anxiety in general, or for people trying to power through a difficult run!

Deep Breathing

Air can become trapped in the lungs if you are taking quick breaths; when this happens, this can lead to increased shortness of breath.

Although the “deep breath” practice isn’t necessary all of the time, it can be useful when you feel air trapped in the lungs and when you feel the need to take a big breath of fresh air.

How to practice deep breathing:

1. Sitting or standing, tuck the elbows back slightly
2. Take a deep breath
3. Count to five, holding the breath in
4. Exhale slowly, until you feel that you have released the trapped air

This exercise can be performed in conjunction with other types of breathing exercises and can be repeated three to four times per day.

Huff Cough Technique

Sometimes, you have to get the mucus out! However, the constant coughing can make you exhausted, right?

Well, the Huff Cough Technique is designed to not only conserve energy but also bring in a little bit extra oxygen – thus allowing you to breathe a little bit more effectively.

To perform the Huff Cough Technique:

1. Sit upright in a comfortable position
2. Make an effort to inhale just a little bit deeper that you would for a normal inhalation
3. Using your abdominal muscles, on the exhale, blow out the air in three even breaths while you make the sounds “ha, ha, ha”

Alternate Nostril Breathing

Alternate nostril breathing is a type of yogic breathing, or pranayama, which has been done for centuries. Its Sanskrit name is Nadi Shodhana. If you’ve gone to a yoga class, you may have done it before – and you may have found it to be strange.

The practice of pranayama has been studied in COPD patients.

According to one study, various types of breathing techniques have been found to be effective and doing a combination of yogic pranayama may “improve the subjective experience of health, disease severity, and functional status for COPD patients, without much improvement in FEV1 actually occurring and with airflow limitation not fully reversible but usually progressive.”

What does this actually mean?

It means that during a three-month research study, participants reported that their health was better, even though their spirometry tests didn’t actually improve.

So – alternate nostril breathing could make you feel better. Let's give it a try!

1. Sit upright in comfortable position
2. Using the right hand, place the tip of the little finger on the left nostril and the pad of the thumb on the right nostril
3. On the exhalation, use the thumb to close the right nostril, breathing out through the left nostril
4. Inhale through the left nostril, then close the left nostril with the little finger
5. Open the right nostril on the exhalation
6. Inhale through the right nostril, then close the nostril with the thumb
7. Open the left nostril, and breathe through that nostril
8. You have completed one round of alternate nostril breathing! Do 10 rounds, increasing if desired

Bending Forward

You may find you naturally lean onto a table, counter, or the back of a chair when you're feeling out of breath — that's a natural reaction. Bending forward at the waist mobilizes the diaphragm, which helps your lungs function more efficiently.

This can be a helpful way to catch your breath, but it ultimately won't help you strengthen your respiratory muscles as much as other breathing exercises. Use this posture when you need to, but don't let it replace pursed-lip or belly breathing, which actually retrain weakened muscles.

Reset Your Breathing When You Need a Break

It's important to be able to choose the right breathing technique for the right situation. For example, if you're feeling extremely out of breath, don't push ahead to try to overcome the problem. Instead, sit down, relax your shoulders, and sit comfortably to regain your composure.

You could also shock your skin to improve breathing. Splashing cold water over your face or using a fan to blow cold air over your body can help in two ways: the sudden sensation can stimulate processes that reduce the feeling of breathlessness, and it can help distract you from the discomfort for a few minutes while you regroup.

In general, pursed-lip breathing is the most accessible and effective technique when you need to open up your airways immediately, so get comfortable with the process as soon as possible.

Work with a pulmonary rehab group or therapist if you want to learn and progress quickly and safely.