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# COPD: Coping with Fatigue

It's common to feel tired when you have COPD. During physical activity, your energy level may be low. This is known as fatigue.

## How does COPD cause fatigue?

COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) is a health problem that keeps your lungs from working as they should. The lungs' job is to get oxygen to the body. Oxygen is an important gas your body needs to work correctly. The air you breathe in contains oxygen. Inside the lungs, air moves through tubes called airways. In healthy airways, air moves in and out easily. With COPD, lungs and airways are damaged. When the lungs are damaged it, takes more work to get air into the lungs. Poor air flow means the body can't get the oxygen it needs. You may also have higher levels of carbon dioxide. Carbon dioxide is a waste product of breathing. COPD also causes inflammation in the lungs. These things can also lead to fatigue.

With COPD, lung damage is usually from breathing in irritants over a long period of time. The main irritant that causes COPD is cigarette smoke. Other irritants are pollution, dust, fumes, and chemicals.

## Treatment for fatigue

Except for a lung transplant COPD has no cure. But certain treatments can help symptoms such as fatigue. These treatments include:

- **Bronchodilators.** These medicines help open the airways to help you breathe easier.
- **Combination medicines.** These include a bronchodilator and a steroid. Bronchodilators help make breathing easier by opening the airways. Steroids help ease inflammation in the lungs
- **Antibiotics.** A respiratory infection can make COPD symptoms worse. Antibiotics are medicines that help treat infections.
- **Pulmonary rehab (rehabilitation).** This program teaches ways to ease COPD symptoms. It includes tips on exercising, correct posture, how to conserve energy, and healthy eating to improve breathing.
- **Oxygen therapy.** When the level of oxygen in your blood is too low, your healthcare provider may prescribe oxygen. Oxygen can help you feel better and be more active. You may use the extra oxygen all the time. Or you may need it only during some activities such as exercise. Use it as your provider advises.
- **Surgery.** You may need surgery for severe symptoms when other treatments have not helped. Surgery removes the most damaged parts of the lungs.

Your healthcare provider will work with you to decide on the best treatment plan for you.

## Self-care tips for coping with fatigue



There are things you can do to manage your fatigue and have more energy:

- **Balance activity and rest.** This can help you from getting overtired. Stop and rest before you feel worn out. If an activity takes a lot of energy, break it into parts. For instance, fold the laundry. Then have a rest before putting it away.
- **Save your energy.** The way you use your body during a task can help you have more energy. Do activities slowly. Rushing through activities uses more energy. It can also increase shortness of breath. Sit to dress and to do other daily tasks such as brushing your teeth. Use a cart with wheels to move food, laundry and other items around your house. Keep the things you use often at waist level so you can get them easily. Do things that are most important to you when you have the most energy. Ask family and friends for help with challenging tasks.
- **Eat well.** When you're tired, you may not be eating as well as you should. Poor nutrition can make symptoms worse. It can also raise your risk for infections. Try resting before eating. Eat smaller meals throughout the day. Ask your healthcare provider if you should take vitamins or supplements.
- **Stay at a healthy weight.** Being underweight can limit your energy. Being overweight can make shortness of breath worse. Work with your healthcare provider to find out the best weight for you.
- **Don't be afraid to exercise.** Exercise may make you short of breath. But exercise can strengthen breathing muscles. It can also give you more energy. Walking is a good way to get oxygen moving through the body. Ask your healthcare provider about safe exercises for you.
- **Do breathing exercises.** Learn how to do belly breathing and pursed-lip breathing. Do these exercises while you are working. They can help you breathe better. Taking slow, deep breaths at any time can give you more of the oxygen you need.

Here are more ways to reduce symptoms caused by COPD:

- **Stop smoking.** Cigarette smoking is the main cause of COPD. Stopping smoking is the most important step you can take to treat COPD. If you need help stopping

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smoking, talk with your healthcare provider.

- **Stay away from secondhand smoke and other irritants.** Try to stay away from smoke, chemicals, fumes, and dust. Don't let anyone smoke in your home or around you. Stay indoors on days that have high air pollution.
- **Prevent lung infections.** Get the vaccines your provider advises. Having COPD raises your risk for flu and pneumonia. This can make your symptoms worse. Ask your healthcare provider about the flu and pneumonia vaccines. Take steps to prevent colds and other lung infections. Stay away from crowds during cold and flu season. Also stay away from people who are sick.
- **Practice correct handwashing.** Wash your hands often with soap and clean, running water for at least 20 seconds. Use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol when you can't wash your hands.

## When to call your healthcare provider

Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of these problems:

- Fever of 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, or as directed by your healthcare provider
- Symptoms that don't get better, or get worse
- New symptoms