



## Understanding COPD

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, commonly referred to as COPD, is an umbrella term for several lung diseases that make it difficult to breathe. The two main forms of COPD include chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Doctors now classify anyone who has emphysema or chronic bronchitis as having COPD.

COPD can cause coughing with large amounts of mucus, wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and degradation of the lungs. People who have COPD may find it difficult to engage in daily activities without becoming breathless. Symptoms may be quite similar to asthma but with an entirely different cause.

People who suffer from COPD are typically smokers or those who used to smoke. Long-term exposure to other lung irritants, such as dust or air pollution, also can contribute to COPD. COPD is a common illness among

the elderly who experienced long-term exposure to either cigarette smoke or other noxious particles from fuels, chemicals and occupational dusts before more stringent environmental regulations were implemented. The Mayo Clinic says about 1 percent of people with COPD have the disease due to a genetic disorder that causes low levels of a protein called alpha-1-antitrypsin, or AAT. AAT is made in the liver and secreted into the bloodstream to help protect the lungs. In healthy lungs, air travels through the trachea, or windpipe, into tubes known as bronchia that connect to the lungs. These bronchial tubes end in large bunches of air sacs, called alveoli. Small capillaries run through the walls of the alveoli to help with the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the body.

When someone has COPD, the airways and alveoli lose their elastic quality and many air

sacs may be destroyed. In addition, the walls of the bronchial tubes can become thick, inflamed and filled with mucus, prohibiting the flow of air. As a result, less oxygen is breathed into the body and passed into the bloodstream to fuel the body's needs. Lack of oxygen can lead to blueness of the lips and fingernail beds, fatigue and reduced mental acuity.

No treatment currently exists to reverse damage to the lungs or other components of the respiratory system. The majority of COPD therapies are designed to mitigate symptoms and make breathing easier. These include inhaled medications or pills taken orally. Many people with COPD may need to take medicines known as controller medications every day. In the event of a breathing attack, rescue inhalers also may be prescribed.

The COPD Foundation says other therapies

also may help patients cope with COPD. Oxygen therapy can reduce strain on the heart and prevent the negative side effects of decreasing blood-oxygen levels. Learning certain breathing techniques, including abdominal and pursed-lips breathing, can reduce anxiety levels and prevent hyperventilation, which typically compounds breathing problems.

People with COPD also should improve the air quality in their homes. Allergens and air irritants can make breathing more difficult or lead to acute attacks. Install an air filtration system to keep a home clean.

Above all, quitting smoking is the most effective way to combat COPD, and smokers should speak with their physicians about smoking cessation programs and medications.

## Simple ways to maintain your mental acuity

Many people know that a combination of a healthy diet and routine exercise is the best way to maintain their physical health. But what about mental well-being? Memory lapses are often assumed to be an accepted side effect of aging, but such an assumption is incorrect, as there are many steps men and women can take to maintain their mental acuity well into their golden years.

- Find time for cardiovascular exercise. Cardiovascular exercise can help men and women maintain healthy weights and reduce their risk for potentially deadly ailments like diabetes and heart disease. But cardiovascular exercise also can boost brain power. Cardiovascular exercise pumps oxygen-rich

blood to the brain, and that blood contains glucose that can fuel brain cells. Cardiovascular exercise also strengthens blood vessels, which can help prevent potentially devastating diseases, such as stroke, that can have a lasting and negative impact on cognitive function.

- Find time for friends and family. Many people need no reason to socialize, but those that do can now cite boosting brain function as a great reason to get together with family and friends. Routine socialization can keep a brain sharp by reducing its levels of cortisol, a potentially destructive hormone brought on by stress. Researchers also believe that routine interaction with other people stimulates

structures in the brain's frontal lobe that are likely responsible for planning, decision making and response control.

- Squeeze in a nap every so often. Naps can have a reenergizing effect on men and women, but a study from German researchers also found that naps also can improve memory. In the study, researchers divided participants into three groups: people who would stay awake for 60 minutes; people who would sleep for six minutes; and people who would sleep for 30 to 45 minutes. After the hour was up, participants were given a word recall test, and those who slept performed better on the test than those who hadn't. But the development that was

perhaps most interesting was that those who slept for just six minutes performed just as well on the test as those who slept for far longer, leading researchers to suggest that men and women need not take long naps to improve their memories.

- Include fish in your diet. A study from researchers at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center found that people who eat fish once per week have a 60 percent lower risk of developing Alzheimer's disease than those who do not include fish in their weekly diets. Researchers credit this lower risk to DHA, an omega-3 fatty acid that is found in both the brain and in fish such as salmon and tuna.



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