

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.



Taking a Breath of Fresh Air

Respiratory disease can leave you breathless during the most mundane tasks, like rising from a chair or fixing a meal. Exercise can seem out of the question.

But physical activity is important for those with even advanced cases of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and other lung disorders. Because stronger muscles need less oxygen, regular exercise can make it easier for you to breathe. And it can minimize dyspnea and fatigue. Here's how to get started safely.

- **Talk with your doctor.** Your physician or therapist can help set an activity level and exercise goals. You can also locate a nearby hospital or rehabilitation center that offers an organized pulmonary rehab program, where a team of medical professionals can collaborate on a customized routine suited to your specific condition. Clinicians can also offer guidance on nutrition, exercise, breathing techniques and smoking cessation.

- **Start small.** Begin with just a few minutes a day, if that's all you're able to do. Gradually elevate your goals to levels you can meet. Eventually, you'll want to strive for 20 to 30 minutes of exercise 4 times per week, but how gradually you get to this level is up to you.

- **Breathe correctly.** Always begin exercise sessions with a warm-up breathing period. Just as simple stretching warms up your muscles, pursed-lip breathing warms up the lungs. First, inhale through your nose so that the stomach muscles expand, then exhale through your mouth with lips pursed.

Exhale for twice as long as you inhale to expel the air from your lungs. Practice this technique for 10 minutes before exercising. Once you master it, perform pursed-lip breathing during exercise as well.

- **Pick something you enjoy.** Anything that elevates your pulse rate is beneficial, so choose an enjoyable and motivating activity. Walking is an easy form of exercise that produces valuable benefits. Swimming and aquatic therapy are popular, although they are more advanced options. Alternate activities to stay motivated.

Resistance training (lifting light weights with arms and legs) makes muscles stronger and increases endurance. It can help reverse the effects of deconditioning and boost your endurance. Regardless of your activity, end each session with a cool-down activity, which can be stretching, or performing an aerobic activity at a slower pace.

- **Maintain oxygen therapy.** People with COPD often benefit from supplemental oxygen. Some patients require oxygen only when sleeping or during activity, while others need a continuous supply.

Exercising while receiving oxygen therapy is possible, but speak with your health care provider first. Treadmills and stationary bikes are popular exercise options for patients on supplemental oxygen.

- **Eat right.** Anyone starting an exercise program should follow a healthy diet, especially those with respiratory disease. A healthy diet helps you feel better, provides more energy and keeps weight down, which puts less strain on the heart.

Consider eating several small meals during the day. Because your stomach is directly below the lungs, big meals can push the stomach up against your diaphragm and make it difficult to breathe.

Avoid gas-producing foods—broccoli, apples, cabbage, corn, cucumbers and carbonated beverages. These items can bloat your stomach and constrict the diaphragm. Also, limit salt and caffeine, which can retain fluids and interfere with medications.

- **Avoid infections.** Using exercise equipment in an enclosed environment at home, in the gym or at a clinic exposes you to germs, crowds and irritants. Infections can wreak havoc on people with compromised respiratory function.

To combat this problem, you need to eat properly and get plenty of rest to ward off sickness. Avoid crowds when possible, especially during cold and flu seasons, and limit contact with people who are sick. Wash your hands often, and clean exercise equipment with a disinfectant prior to use. Ask your doctor about flu and pneumonia vaccines. Don't exercise in an environment with airborne irritants, such as smoke, dust, smog, fumes, pollens and animals.

Finally, be aware of the signs and symptoms of infection—fever, chest tightness and increased shortness of breath. If you believe you have an infection, stop your exercise program and contact your physician.

Keeping up an exercise program when your respiratory system is compromised can be a challenge. But the benefits to your health and quality of life are worth the effort.

Information adapted from the American Association for Respiratory Care, the American College of Sports Medicine, and the American College of Chest Physicians.