



# EASIER BREATHING

*Regular exercise, anticipating flare-ups help in managing COPD.*

**BY MICHELLE GIBEAULT TRAUB**

We've all experienced the discomfort of struggling to breathe when we are congested from a cold or during strenuous exercise. For the 16 million Americans who are diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), it's a daily occurrence. Millions more experience difficulty breathing but are unaware they have the disease. Fortunately, for anyone challenged by COPD or other lung diseases, there are strategies to maximize breathing efficiency, increase comfort and maintain an active life.

## **MINIMIZE FURTHER LUNG DAMAGE**

COPD, also known as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, is generally the result of smoking or inhaling air pollutants that damage the lungs. Once lung tissue is damaged, it can't be repaired. As a result, it is vital to protect healthy lung tissue by quitting smoking as soon as possible. Due to the addictive nature of nicotine, this is not an easy task. Getting support through a smoking cessation program is often necessary. VA offers smoking cessation clinics and group counseling sessions through the Quit VET program. Call 1-855-784-8838 or visit [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov) to get started.

**MANAGE SYMPTOMS** When the lungs aren't working properly, a person can experience shortness of breath, persistent cough and chest pain. All these symptoms can be very tiring, making conserving

one's energy essential. In addition, extreme temperature changes can make breathing more difficult, so maintaining a consistent body temperature by dressing in layers and avoiding hot or cold showers can also be helpful. Any form of stress can strain on breathing, so try stress-relieving techniques like meditation, breathing exercises, and listening to soothing music.

**PLAN AHEAD** Those with lung disease should plan their days according to their energy level. This may require scheduling important activities in the morning when energy is highest, or allowing time during the day for rest. It's also important to be prepared for times when breathing is especially difficult, known as "flares." An emergency plan created by a trusted health-care team can take the worry out of such moments; this may include the use of medications, when to call the team or when to seek emergency care. Individuals with COPD should watch for the sudden onset of rapid heartbeat, nausea, dizziness or unexpected pain in the chest, arm, neck or jaw, as these may require immediate medical assistance.

## **PRACTICE YOUR BREATHING**

Strengthening and stretching the muscles around the lungs through regular breathing exercises makes breathing easier and more comfortable. Furthermore, learning breathing techniques can

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See **COPD** on page 16



## Healthy choices for a healthier America

### The bad news

- According to the Department of Health and Human Services, more than 80 percent of adolescents do not do enough aerobic physical activity to meet recommendations for youth. Children now spend more than 7.5 hours a day in front of TV, computer, tablet and/or phone screens. And only six states – Illinois, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New York and Vermont – require physical education in every grade level, K-12.
- About 90 percent of Americans eat more sodium than is recommended. And empty calories from added sugars and solid fats contribute to 40 percent of total daily calories for kids 2 to 18; half of these calories come from soda, fruit drinks, dairy and grain desserts, pizza and whole milk.

### The good news

Americans can get active and eat better without joining a gym or signing up for weight-management meal programs.

- Go for walks instead of watching TV or texting. Park the car as far away as possible when you go to the store or mall. At work, replace your coffee break with an outdoor walk. Use the stairs instead of the elevator.
- Instead of sitting in the stands, walk up and down the field while watching your kids play sports.
- Do squats, stretches or other physical activities while watching TV shows.
- Choose lean beef, turkey breast or chicken breast. Watch your family's sodium intake by using the nutrition facts label. Cut back on solid fats like ice cream and other desserts, pizza, and processed meats like sausages, hot dogs, bacon and ribs.

### COPD continued from page 14

be helpful in preventing and managing COPD flares. Two techniques commonly used include pursed lip breathing and abdominal breathing (also called belly or diaphragmatic breathing). Videos explaining these techniques are posted online at the American Lung Association's website, [lung.org](http://lung.org). Simply search for "breathing exercises" to find instructions. A respiratory therapist can also teach patients individualized breathing techniques.

**EXERCISE REGULARLY** Although it may seem counterintuitive, regular exercise is essential for improving lung function. The adage "use it or lose it" applies. Participating in a pulmonary rehabilitation program enables individuals with COPD to learn a variety of safe exercises they can complete at their own pace. Aerobic exercise like walking or riding on a stationary bike helps improve the way the body uses oxygen, while also increasing endurance. Stretching exercises like gentle yoga and tai chi can loosen tight chest muscles and encourage relaxation. A consistent exercise routine of two to four times per week helps gradually strengthen muscles and breathing efficiency, while also improving mood. It is empowering to see progress over time. Therefore, those with COPD are encouraged to choose exercises they enjoy and can stick with. Participating in group fitness activities is also recommended, as added social support is motivating.

COPD is a challenging disease, but it doesn't have to stop individuals from enjoying life. If you or a loved one have difficulty breathing, consult with a pulmonologist to determine the best treatment options.

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## BERRY good food

Grapes and berries are a good way to improve lung health, WebMD reports, citing a recent study conducted in Norway and Britain.

Researchers found that people who eat more foods with a particular type of flavonoid called anthocyanins had the best lung function as they aged.

Anthocyanins are most common in dark-pigmented fruits and vegetables, especially red grapes, blueberries and purple potatoes.

"A diet rich in fruits and vegetables can help protect the lungs against damage, preserving their functionality and reducing the risk of developing respiratory diseases later in life," says Vanessa Garcia Larsen, the study's lead author. "Foods rich in anthocyanin flavonoids might protect the lungs through their antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties."



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