

Living Well with COPD:

Taking care of yourself when sick

Note: If you're struggling to breathe or your lips or fingernails turn blue, call 911 right away.

Being sick can make it harder to breathe. This is true whether you're sick with the flu, a head cold, an upset stomach, or fighting any other kind of illness or infection. Here are some important steps you can take to breathe better.

Take all your breathing medicines

Daily inhaled medicines (including Spiriva®, Striverdi®, Stiolto®, and Advair Diskus®)

- Use your inhaled medicine every day to help your airways work more effectively.

Rescue medicines (such as albuterol)

- Use your rescue medicine if you have chest tightness or more shortness of breath than usual. Your rescue medicine will help open the airways in your lungs to make breathing easier.

Oral steroids (such as prednisone and Medrol®)

- If your doctor has ordered an oral steroid for you, use it to treat the swelling and extra phlegm produced by inflamed airways. Using oral steroids for a short time rarely causes side effects. Any side effects you might have, such as sleeping problems, hunger, or weight gain, will probably go away when you stop taking the medicine.

If you're not taking your medicines when you need them, it can make your condition worse. If the cost of medicine is a problem, talk to the social worker at your medical center. He or she can help you find out if you qualify for programs and resources that offer medicines free, or at a reduced cost.

Use your flutter valve device

If you have more mucus production, and you have a flutter valve device (such as Aerobika) at home, use it at least 2 times a day, as directed, to help clear your airways.

Drink enough liquid

Try to drink about 1 cup of clear liquid every 2 hours. Water is best. Other good choices are hot or iced teas and juice. If you've been vomiting, wait a couple of hours before starting liquids again. Taking small sips can help you keep from throwing up.

Practice skills for better breathing

One of the reasons you might get short of breath, is that you're not clearing enough used air out of your lungs to make room for the incoming air. Practicing pursed-lip and diaphragmatic breathing can help you get more oxygen into your lungs and help them work more efficiently.

Another problem for many people with COPD is that when they can't breathe, they start to panic. This makes it even harder for them to catch their breath. If this happens to you, try using relaxation and better breathing techniques. These techniques can help put you in control of your breathing.

To learn these techniques, ask your nurse for a copy of the handout, ***Skills for Better Breath Control***.

When to call

Call your doctor or Consulting Nurse Service if you have:

- Small amounts of blood in your sputum or are coughing up dark mucus
- More mucus, wheezing, coughing, or shortness of breath than usual
- Mucus that is thicker or has changed color to yellow, brown, or green
- Tightness or pain in your chest
- Harder time breathing than usual; you can't get a deep breath
- To lean forward in order to breath when you're sitting down
- Shortness of breath that gets worse even after using your rescue inhaler
- COPD flare-up
- Fever (your temperature is 100.5 degrees or higher)
- Faster heartbeat or a pulse that doesn't get back to normal
- Dizziness, confusion, or are sleepier than usual
- Headache that doesn't go away
- Trouble thinking or talking clearly
- Signs of being dehydrated, such as dark urine, dry tongue, cracked and dry lips
- Blue skin on your fingertips or around your fingernails
- Questions about your breathing or medicines

During clinic hours: Call your primary care doctor.

For medical advice after clinic hours: Call the Kaiser Permanente Consulting Nurse Service toll-free 24 hours a day: 1-800-297-6877.