

On the Front Line of COPD Management

By Michael A. Van Kerckhove

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Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, refers to two lung diseases: chronic bronchitis and emphysema. In essence, patients' breathing is severely compromised by an obstruction to airflow. Common symptoms include an excessively wet cough, wheezing, shortness of breath, and tightness in the chest.

By 2020, the World Bank and World Health Organization's survey estimates that COPD will be ranked fifth in *burden of disease*, its calculation of financial costs, mortality and other factors. This is up from twelfth place in the original 1990 survey. COPD as an economic burden is a leading cause of disability-induced unemployment.

You, as a home caregiver, are on the front line of relieving this burden. While there is no cure, COPD is treatable, and your caregiving is essential to a successful rehabilitation program. Diet, exercise, and environmental maintenance are all areas in which you can greatly assist clients.

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Diet

A healthy diet provides COPD patients with the energy and extra calories required to fight chest infections and to work through their more labored breathing. Planning and preparing meals and otherwise advising your client on which foods to include are valuable ways you can help.

The adage of small frequent meals versus fewer big meals is particularly relevant for treating COPD clients. Starting the day with a larger, more nutritious meal will provide clients with the necessary calories to maintain energy throughout the day. Smaller meals also prevent clients from feeling too full, which can make it harder to breathe.

While a morning coffee may once have been a necessity, unfortunately caffeine can react negatively to COPD medications and cause restlessness or nervousness, leading to exacerbated symptoms. Likewise, help COPD clients avoid foods high in salt, as water retention caused by sodium also makes for more difficult breathing.

Exercise

Regular exercise is vital to a client's successful COPD symptom management. In general, it increases endurance and improves blood circulation, making for better use of oxygen. Upper body exercises improve breathing and the ability to perform daily activities. Lower body exercises such as stair climbing and treadmill or track walking have also proven to benefit COPD patients.

Breathing exercises, such as pursed lip breathing and diaphragmatic breathing, lead to stronger breathing muscles, more oxygen, and overall easier breathing. A good regiment includes sessions of five to ten minutes, three to four times a day.

Environmental Maintenance

Finally, you should also consider environmental concerns in a client's home, particularly as related to air quality. A good place to start is to keep the client's home properly ventilated through open windows, exhaust fans, and filtration systems. However, windows should be kept closed during poor air quality days and dusty conditions such as construction projects. Also, maintaining a balanced humidity level counters dry air from home heating systems and discourages irritating pests attracted to more humid environments.

Managing or avoiding very cold air, cigarette and fireplace smoke, and other air pollutants are ways you can best serve COPD clients, as does limiting the use of personal care products such as hair sprays, perfumes, and lotions.

Light housekeeping assistance can go a long way to achieving success. Remove and properly store dust collecting clutter. Weekly bed linen laundering minimizes dust mites, as does keeping carpets vacuumed and floors clean. At the same time, reducing exposure to harsh household cleaning products and other chemicals, including air fresheners, is important.

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Focusing on these three main areas of care, while consulting with the client, his or her family and doctor will significantly improve a COPD client's chance for a higher quality of life.