



Eating Your Way to Better Breathing

COPD and other breathing problems are complex disorders that are affected by not only the state of the lungs, but also by our other body systems. Proper nutrition plays a significant role in your breathing and eating and drinking appropriately can make a real difference.



The key to good nutrition is to eat a well-balanced diet that provides enough calories, vitamins, minerals, and water for your daily requirements. Respiratory clinicians have often taught that you should eat more of certain foods (e.g., fats) than other food groups (e.g., carbohydrates and proteins), but the data really doesn't support this notion except in critically ill patients in the hospital.

Weight loss can be a real problem in COPD. COPD patients may use up to 40% more energy per day than normal because of their high work of breathing. Studies have demonstrated that patients that are underweight (< 90% of their ideal body weight) are at increased risk for infection, hospitalization, and other problems. If you tend to be underweight, trying eating high calorie foods and more calories per day.

Many patients with breathing difficulties have difficulty eating properly for a number of reasons. Responding to these problems can generally be overcome with creative thinking:

- "I feel bloated and can't breathe well after a meal so I don't eat much." Try eating several small meals rather than 2-3 big meals. Snack throughout the day. Avoid gassy foods that cause you to feel bloated.
- "I don't have the energy or breath to cook well." Prepare nutritious foods that require less energy to fix. Fix a larger portion and freeze some to warm up later. Convenience foods (e.g., pre-cooked, ready to eat) can provide good alternatives but you do have to watch sodium levels if you are on a salt restricted diet. "Meals on Wheels" can be an inexpensive option if you don't cook.
- "I don't have any appetite." Some medications can upset the stomach (e.g., theophylline), but the most common cause is swallowing mucus. If you cough up mucus or have sinus drainage, avoid swallowing the mucus as much as possible.
- "I just can't eat that much." If you can't eat a lot, focus on foods that are higher in calories. Add a dish of ice cream to the end of your day.

High calorie supplement drinks can be useful when you are unable to eat well (e.g., during an illness). Special formulations for people with breathing problems are available but any quality supplement is probably fine for COPD patients at home. Eating a good meal is best but drinking a high-calorie, high vitamin drink can substitute when necessary.

Alcohol should be avoided in excess as it can depress respiratory drive and increase the risk of other disease. With your doctor's approval, it can be consumed in small amounts (e.g., 1 oz hard liquor, 4 oz wine, or 12 oz beer per day) with no adverse effect and some studies suggest it may even be beneficial. A beer with a meal is actually a good way to add about 150 low sodium calories to the diet.

You only need to avoid foods if they cause a problem for you. Some have believed they must avoid milk products because they increase mucus production, but this is unfounded. Unless your doctor has restricted your diet for some other reason (e.g., low-sodium, low-fat, ulcer), eat the foods that you like.

For other patients with COPD, their problem might be the opposite- they are overweight. Obesity (>20% over ideal body weight) can also have a negative impact on breathing and general health. Obesity restricts the movement of the chest and decreases lung volume. It can predispose the patient to other problems including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and obstructive sleep apnea. If you are overweight, a responsible weight loss program under your physician's guidance can be helpful.

It is important to maintain enough fluid intake to prevent dehydration, as this can cause mucus to become thick and difficult to clear from the airways. Excessive fluid intake can also be harmful, especially to patients that retain fluid. Eight to ten glasses per day are appropriate unless your doctor states differently.



Vitamin supplements (e.g., one a day) may be helpful, especially when diet is lacking in proper vitamins. There is some evidence that increased intake of Vitamin C (500-1,000 mg/day) and beta-carotene (it produces Vitamin A and E) can be helpful.

Proper nutrition is important to everyone but especially the patient with breathing problems. Find the diet that is best for you and practice it on a daily basis in order to improve your general health and breathing. Talk to your doctor when you have questions. Taking these steps can help you in your goal to Breathe Easy.