Managing Your Chronic Lung Disease During the COVID-19 Pandemic

If you have a chronic lung disease, such as COPD or asthma, you are at higher risk of serious illness during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is more important than ever to take action and protect your lung health. This fact sheet will review tips for how you can protect your lung health, including: how to manage your condition, when to call your healthcare provider, how to avoid illness and managing stress.

Tip #1: Manage your condition
Take all medicines as prescribed:
- If you have medicines your healthcare provider has prescribed for your lung disease, take all of them as directed. This includes taking your daily control medicines, even if you feel well. Do not stop any medicines without first checking with your healthcare provider. If you have questions about your medicines, contact your healthcare provider.
- Work with your healthcare provider or pharmacist to ensure you are taking your medicines correctly.
- Be sure you have plenty of medicine on hand—at least a 60-90-day supply. Do not delay getting refills. See if you can have your medicines delivered or have someone pick them up for you.
- If you routinely use a nebulizer to take inhaled medicine, you can continue to use it as directed. However, if you are sick with COVID-19 or other respiratory infection, using a nebulizer could increase the risk of infecting others through the mist that you exhale. To avoid this problem, use your nebulizer in a location that is separate from others in your household. You may also talk to your healthcare provider about switching to an inhaler temporarily, or about buying a special nebulizer filter that reduces the amount of mist that you exhale.
- You will need to keep your nebulizer clean to prevent infection. Educational videos on cleaning and using your nebulizers are available on the COPD Foundation website.
- If you smoke or vape, this can increase your risk of more severe illness if you do contract COVID-19. For help with quitting smoking and/or vaping, there are a number of websites that can help you including: the ATS, COPD Foundation, US Centers for Disease Control (CDC), American Lung Association, and NIH Smokefree.

Tip #2: Follow your action plan
An action plan is a guide that you develop with your healthcare provider to help you manage your chronic disease. This plan can include what you are supposed to do every day (your daily management plan) and what you need to do if you have a change in symptoms (a rescue or sick plan). Your action plan can be a helpful tool to use to manage your lung condition and monitor your symptoms.

Tip #3: Contact your healthcare provider about any unusual symptoms
Sometimes it can be hard to sort out whether you are having a flare-up or an acute illness, such as a virus.
- If you are having a flare-up of your chronic lung disease, you may have symptoms such as increased coughing, coughing up more mucus than usual, fever, chest tightness, breathlessness, increased fatigue, or other symptoms.
- There is likely to be some overlap between the symptoms you normally experience during a flare-up (also called an exacerbation) of your chronic condition and symptoms of COVID-19 illness. One clue is a high fever (> 39.4 degrees Celsius or > 103 degrees Fahrenheit) which is a common symptom of COVID-19, but in general, less likely to happen in an exacerbation. Pay close attention to your symptoms to sort out what is "normal" for you or what seems different. Reach out to your healthcare provider promptly if you are concerned about symptoms that feel "different" than normal, such as shortness of breath.
- It is very important that you follow your action plan.
- Watch for any change in symptoms. Remember to tell your healthcare provider if you have a major change in symptoms that prompted you to use your rescue or sick plan.
- If you do not have an action plan, you can get a free form from the COPD Foundation (for COPD) or the American Lung Association (for Asthma) websites.
- Work with your healthcare provider to complete an action plan that will help you manage your chronic lung disease, or update your plan when needed.

If your action plan does not include it, your healthcare provider may also suggest that you:
- Have regular office visits with your healthcare provider, either in-person or via telemedicine.
- Get recommended vaccines as appropriate for you.
- Make sure you have all chronic conditions under control, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, in addition to your chronic lung disease.

Tip #4: Contact your healthcare provider about any unusual symptoms
Sometimes it can be hard to sort out whether you are having a flare-up or an acute illness, such as a virus.
- If you are having a flare-up of your chronic lung disease, you may have symptoms such as increased coughing, coughing up more mucus than usual, fever, chest tightness, breathlessness, increased fatigue, or other symptoms.
- There is likely to be some overlap between the symptoms you normally experience during a flare-up (also called an exacerbation) of your chronic condition and symptoms of COVID-19 illness. One clue is a high fever (> 39.4 degrees Celsius or > 103 degrees Fahrenheit) which is a common symptom of COVID-19, but in general, less likely to happen in an exacerbation. Pay close attention to your symptoms to sort out what is “normal” for you or what seems different. Reach out to your healthcare provider promptly if you are concerned about symptoms that feel “different” than normal, such as shortness of breath.
- Most medical practices and hospitals are asking that you call first, rather than just going to the office or emergency room, unless it is a life-threatening situation. Ask if you need to be seen in person.

If you have a chronic lung disease such as COPD or asthma, you are at higher risk of serious illness during the COVID-19 pandemic, so it is more important than ever to take action and protect your lung health. This fact sheet will review tips for how you can protect your lung health, including: how to manage your condition, when to call your healthcare provider, how to avoid illness and managing stress.
Do physical activity and exercise to maintain strength and endurance. You can read about Exercise with Lung Disease at the ATS website.

Some suggestions:
- Get enough sleep every night. You can read about Healthy Sleep with Social Distancing at the ATS website.
- Take care of your mental health. Consider finding new hobbies or activities that you enjoy doing. For more information about mental health during this time, visit the American Psychological Association website.
- Connect with others. You can stay connected with friends and family through phone calls, video chat, or social media. For more information about staying connected, visit the National Coalition for Mental Health website.

Additional Website Resources
- American Lung Association: https://www.lung.org
- American Thoracic Society: https://www.thoracic.org
- CHEST Foundation: Chestfoundation.org
- COPD Foundation: https://www.copdfoundation.org
- US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: https://www.cdc.gov
- For My Lung Health (ATS & CHEST): https://www.formylunghealth.com
- NIH Smokefree: https://smokefree.gov
- UK National Health Service: https://www.nhs.uk

This information is a public service of the American Thoracic Society. The content is for educational purposes only. It should not be used as a substitute for the medical advice of one’s healthcare provider.