



Staying Close

You can stay intimate (even active!) when you have COPD

by Kathleen Engel

Being close to the one you love is important. Making love helps strengthen the bond between you and your partner. A loving sex life also helps you feel better, eases your stress, and makes daily life more pleasant. But if you have COPD, feeling tired and being worried about your health may keep you from having the love life you deserve.

Can people with COPD have a healthy and safe sex life? “Yes!” says COPD expert Barry Make, MD. “People with lung disease become short of breath. They may avoid sexual activity because they’re anxious or depressed. This may cause a loss of desire.”

It doesn’t have to be this way, says Dr. Make. Common fears get in the way of working out the problem. Some of the most common fears connected with sex are discussed in this article, along with some ideas for getting past the fear.

The fear: I have COPD. My sex life is over.

The facts: Whether you have mild,

moderate, or severe COPD, there are things you can do to cope with the disease and enjoy a closer union with the one you love.

“The challenge is how to maximize your breathing,” says Dr. Make. “Start with your COPD medicines,” he suggests. “Make sure you take them as your doctor has prescribed.” Medicines for COPD help to improve lung function. This helps you breathe better.

Dr. Make suggests talking to your doctor about timing your doses properly. This can help you to have the best lung function possible while making love.

Dr. Barry J. Make, Pulmonologist

Co-Director of the COPD Program and Director Pulmonary Rehabilitation, and Respiratory Care at the National Jewish Medical and Research Center in Denver, Colorado.

For more information, visit www.nationaljewish.org



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Helpful tips: By boosting your health, you may raise your energy levels. Some ways you can do this are:

- Eat right.
- Drink enough water.
- Make time to exercise.
- Get the rest you need.

Lose unhealthy pounds and aim to get as strong and as fit as you can. This may help you get more pleasure from sex. You might feel better, and that alone can increase your desire. If you have other health problems, see your doctor as needed for treatment.

The fear: I'll be too anxious during lovemaking to enjoy it.

The facts: "Find out what works best for you," says Dr. Make. "Try different positions. Being on the bottom or on your side may be easier than being on the top. You may tend to have more phlegm when you lie down. If so, talk to your doctor. He or she may give you a

device that helps you clear your lungs."

Helpful tips: Plan lovemaking for times when you tend to feel your best. "Mornings can be tough," Dr. Make adds. "People with COPD often wake up with more mucus in their lungs and are more short of breath." Avoid times when you're in a rush or tired.

Let your partner know that you may need to make some changes. Talk about ways to make your lovemaking both safe and pleasing. Choose a time to talk when you're not in the bedroom or on your way there.

Keep your room cool and avoid heavy blankets. Support yourself with pillows to reduce coughing. Use a fan to increase the flow of air in the room. Wait for a while after a big meal or after a workout. Shorten your kisses. If you cough or become short of breath while making love, stop and rest. Pace yourself. Pause to hug and enjoy being close. Move slowly, or ask your partner to do most of the moving.

A support group can be a great source for tips. If you meet with people who are caring and open, you may find it easier to share things you're too shy to tell your doctor.

The fear: I don't think I want to have sex any more.

The facts: You may have low desire for lots of reasons. Getting older. Normal hormone changes as you age. Feeling tired. Feeling down. Medicines you take for other health problems may cause changes in your body. These changes can reduce your sex drive, make sex less pleasant, or make it hard for you to have sex.

Tell your doctor if you have:

- A low sex drive.
- Pain or lack of comfort during sex.
- Trouble getting aroused.

It may not be COPD that's in the way of a pleasing sex life. You may need treatment for a health problem you don't know you have. Men often have trouble with erections as they age. This may be caused by high blood sugar or by narrowed blood vessels due to heart disease. Joint pain and stiffness can hinder your movement. And women with bladder problems may worry they'll leak urine. Be open and honest with your doctor. This will help him or her figure out how to help you.

If feelings of sadness have caused you to lose your desire, you may be depressed. You may need to see a mental health expert for help. Tell your doctor about these feelings.

Helpful tips: The love you and your partner share is more than the physical act of sex. Even couples without health problems need to work on the bond they share. Relax. Spend time together doing things you both enjoy. Play a card game or take a walk. Make an easy meal together. Hold hands and hug. Share little kisses.

Reducing Shortness of Breath During Sex

You may have learned ways to relieve shortness of breath during exercise and daily activity. Here are some tips for reducing shortness of breath during sex.

- Plan sexual activity when you feel good.
- Pace yourself. Increase activity slowly and remember to relax.
- If you use an inhaled medicine before exercise, ask your doctor about using the inhaled medicine before sex.
- Plan sexual activity when your long-acting medicine is at its peak and have your rescue inhaler handy.
- If you increase your oxygen flow during exercise, ask your doctor about increasing oxygen flow during sex.
- If you use a nasal canula, use tubing extensions to extend your range of motion.
- Wait two or three hours after a meal.
- Keep the room cool (for instance, remove heavy blankets).
- Use a fan nearby to increase airflow across your face.

Adapted from from the National Jewish Medical and Research Center's Web site. Available at: www.nationaljewish.org/disease-info/diseases/copd/living/mental/intimate/exercise.aspx



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The fear: I'm not the same as I used to be. My partner doesn't want me this way.

The facts: Someone with a chronic disease can't always do things as before. This hurts your self-esteem. You may feel less attractive. As a result, you become distant. Your partner may not know what's wrong. He or she may be too afraid of causing you pain to try to get close to you. Talking with a counselor may help. Together, you and your loved one can find ways to enjoy a close bond.

Helpful tips: If you notice changes in your breathing during or right after sex, tell your doctor. He or she may be able to make changes to your treatment plan that can help improve your health and your love life, too.

"If you use oxygen, make sure you use it during sex. Use the dose you use for exercise," says Dr. Make. Use enough tubing and tape it behind your back so it stays out of the way as much as possible.

If learning you have COPD has caused your sex life to suffer, talk over your concerns with your doctor. Share your feelings with your partner. Attend a support group to find out how others with COPD keep their love lives alive. 🌱

TIP

For more tips, see *Frontline Advice for COPD Patients*, pages 62-66. Available at: www.nlhep.org/books/Advice_COPDpatient.pdf