

# Staying on Track With Your COPD Treatment

by Linda Ruiz



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Blythe M., 65, says her COPD has good days and bad days. Some days it's hard to get up and down the stairs in her house. On these days, she feels it's extra important to use all of her inhalers. On good days, it's easy to forget. It's better to take less medicine anyway, right?

Not true! says COPD expert Frank Scirba, MD. Many people don't take medicines as prescribed, he admits. Patients often think they can use maintenance inhalers "as needed," but to work right, these medicines must be taken daily and at the correct doses. Experts agree that these inhalers for COPD should be used regularly rather than as needed.

"By doing this, you are taking an important step to treat your COPD," he says. Using your medicines the right way can help you breathe better.

"For most people, remembering is not the biggest problem," Dr. Scirba says. "The real problem is a lack of disease education, which leads to confusion and missed doses."

If you have chronic lung disease, try

to learn as much as you can about the condition. This means learning about how it is treated and the right way to use medicines, such as inhalers. If you understand why you need a certain medicine, you may be more inclined to take it.

## Rescue or Maintenance? Knowing the Difference

It's vital to know the purpose of the medicines you take. Medicines for COPD can be described as either "maintenance" or "rescue"

### Dr. Frank Scirba, Pulmonologist

Associate Professor of Medicine at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Medical Director of the Emphysema/COPD Research Center and the Pulmonary Physiology Laboratory in the Division of Pulmonary, Allergy and Critical Care Medicine.

## The Importance of Taking Your COPD Medications

The COPD medicines your doctor prescribes help you breathe more easily. When you feel better, you may find it's easier to make other healthy changes in your life. Spending time each day to exercise is one of them. Be sure to consult your doctor before starting any fitness program.

There are two types of medicines for COPD. They are rescue and maintenance. Your doctor will likely prescribe both.

### Rescue medicines:

- Taken in times of emergency, or when symptoms quickly get worse.

### Maintenance therapy:

- Taken every day to help maintain control of your COPD.
- Helps you breathe easier longer. Starts to work gradually and lasts 4 to 24 hours.
- Should be taken even when you are breathing better, so you can keep breathing better.

Ask your doctor to explain how your medicines work. Knowing this can help you avoid taking too much or too little. Taking your medicine the wrong way may make you worse instead of better.

medicines. Maintenance, or daily medicines must be taken every day. It does not matter what your symptoms may be or how you are feeling that day. Rescue medicines, on the other hand, are taken as needed to help open your airways quickly. Most people with COPD are prescribed both types of medicines.

Some people think that once they feel better, they can stop taking their daily medicines. The medicines your doctor prescribed for COPD help open the airways. Missing doses may cause your breathing to worsen.

### How Maintenance Medications Work

What if you take aspirin for a headache? Your pain might go away in an hour. If so, you will most likely take the aspirin again the next time. With maintenance medicines for COPD,

the effects are not always so easy to notice.

“The daily maintenance medicines are effective in COPD,” states Dr. Sciorba. But unlike rescue medicines, you might not feel the benefits of them right away. That’s because the medicines take effect over time. By the time you take your daily dose, the medicine is still working from your last dose.

“With shorter-acting medicines, or rescue medicines, you notice the effect soon after you take them,” says Dr. Sciorba. “This is because these medicines work fast and then wear off quickly.”

### Stick With It!

People with chronic lung disease might not notice that their treatment is working for them. One reason is because they have already slowed down a lot. “Most people with COPD cut back on their level of exercise. They move

## Tips for Staying on Track

- Make taking your medicine part of your daily routine. Take your medicine the same time each day, such as upon waking up, at mealtimes, or before bed.
- Keep track of how many doses you've taken. It may help to write down each time you take your medicines or to check it off on a calendar.
- Consider asking a friend or loved one to remind you to take your medicine.
- Keep your medicine in a place where you'll be reminded to take it.
- Set an alarm clock for the time you need to take your medicine.
- Note on your calendar when you need to refill a prescription.

around a lot less doing their daily chores,” explains Dr. Sciorba. This often happens gradually, he says. In fact, most people slow down a bit before the disease is diagnosed. They may not even know that they're doing it. Most people tend to blame “old age” for feeling tired or run down.

After starting treatment, a person might continue with this low level of activity. They might not notice that their breathing is a bit better. “You need to learn how to become more active again,” Dr. Sciorba noted. “This will often help you to feel the effects of the medicine.” Discuss it with your doctor first, he advises. Then start slowly, with a fitness program the doctor suggests. “If you notice an improvement from using your treatments regularly, you will be more inspired to stay on track.”

What do you gain by taking your daily medicines the right way? Regular use of a bronchodilator helps keep your airways open, says Dr. Sciorba.

### The Care You Deserve

What if you forget a dose? What side effects are normal? These are good questions to ask



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your doctor. The answer may be different for you than for someone else. If the cost of your medicines keeps you from taking them, tell your healthcare provider. He or she may know about programs that can help.

“You really need a good relationship with your doctor and his or her staff,” says Dr. Sciorba. “This is one of the most important parts about any treatment program.” Your doctor should be someone you trust. You should be able to ask all your questions without feeling rushed. If your doctor doesn’t have time for all your questions, someone else on staff should be able to help. A nurse or a

respiratory therapist can serve as a good resource.

Remember, there are no questions that are dumb or silly. COPD is a complex disease. Speak up, get the treatment you need, and the care that you deserve. 🙌

#### TIP

Try to learn as much as you can about your condition. Talk to your doctor about how COPD is treated. Make sure you understand how to use your medicines and inhalers properly.