Nutrition & Lung Disease

Why is Nutrition Important?

Nutrition is your body’s fuel. Patients with lung disease (especially COPD) often need more calories (or energy) to help your body breathe. Studies have shown that pulmonary patients who are getting proper nutrition are better able to fight infections, have fewer illnesses, and spend less time in the hospital. Good nutrition will also help you to have more energy and be better able to tolerate exercise and activity.

Monitor Your Weight

Weight status is very important for patients with lung disease. If you are overweight, carrying excess weight puts pressure on the diaphragm, making it harder for you to breathe. If you are underweight, your diaphragm and lung muscles may be too weak to work their best. Some patients with lung disease may also have problems with their fluid status. Retaining fluid can also make breathing more difficult.

It is very important to monitor your weight. Call your doctor if your weight changes (up or down) more than 2 pounds per day or 5 pounds per week!

Nutrition Basics

All food is broken down into carbon dioxide and energy. Carbon dioxide leaves your body when you breathe out. However, when your lungs aren’t working very well, carbon dioxide can build up in the body. This makes your lungs have to work harder to breathe, and can make you feel weak and tired. Ensuring you are getting proper nutrition can help your body get the energy it needs to help you breathe better.

The energy you need to feel your best comes from the foods that you eat. Foods can be categorized by type. There are 3 main types of foods: carbohydrates, fats, and protein.

Carbohydrates

Breads, cereals, starches, beans, vegetables, fruit, dairy, and sweets are all carbohydrates.

Fruits and vegetables are important to include with your meals because they are high in antioxidants, vitamins, and minerals. Studies have shown that vitamins and minerals (especially Vitamin A and Vitamin C) can help to repair and maintain healthy lung tissue. However, there is no evidence at this time to recommend that you take any extra vitamin supplements.

One thing to note: carbohydrate foods produce more carbon dioxide than other types of foods. Sometimes, you may need to limit the amount of carbohydrate you are eating if your carbon dioxide levels are very high. However, it is also important to be sure that you are not overeating because too many calories can also lead to high carbon dioxide levels.

This handout was created by the Riverside Regional Medical Center Dietitians. Please call 757-594-2000 if you have any questions.
Fats

Animal products, butter/margarine, cream, oils, mayonnaise, dressings, and shortening are all fats. If you need to increase calories in your diet, you can add fats to the foods you eat. However, if you are overweight or have high cholesterol/heart disease, you may need to limit some fats in your diet.

Protein

Meats, fish, cheese, nuts, peanut butter, eggs, and soy are all proteins. It is very important that you include protein with your meals and snacks. Protein helps to keep your muscles strong and can prevent muscle break down.

Fluids

All beverages, soups, and foods that are liquid at room temperature (such as gelatin, ice cream, or pudding) are considered fluids. It is important to ensure that you are getting enough fluids because fluid helps to thin mucus, and makes your coughing more productive. However, you should be aware that caffeine can interfere with some medications and may increase your heart rate. Ask your doctor if you need to avoid beverages that contain caffeine.

General Nutrition Tips for Patients with Lung Disease

- Eat Slowly!
- Clear your lungs of mucus before you eat.
- If you are on oxygen, be sure to wear your nasal cannula while you are eating!
- Be sure you sit up straight to eat! This will ease the pressure on your lungs during the meal.
- Choose soft foods that are easy to chew and swallow.
- Eat 5 or 6 small meals instead of 3 large meals. This will allow you to use less oxygen during the meal and won’t make your stomach feel as full.
- Drink liquids at the end of the meal. This will help to ensure you get the nutrition you need before you get too full.
- Avoid overeating. A full stomach makes breathing uncomfortable because it will press on your diaphragm. This gives your lungs less room to expand so breathing will become more difficult.

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Avoid eating gassy foods if they cause you to feel bloated. Bloating creates gas which will also press on your diaphragm. Some gassy food culprits include:
- Carbonated drinks
- Fried or greasy foods
- Spicy foods
- Fruits: apples, avocados, and melon
- Vegetables: beans, broccoli, brussels sprouts, cabbage, cauliflower, cucumbers, leeks, lentils, onions, peas, peppers, pimentos, radishes, scallions, shallots, soy beans, and turnips
- Watch your salt intake. Too much salt can cause your body to retain fluid. Try not to add salt at the table and use herbs and spices to season foods. Watch food labels and try to keep sodium to less than 300 mg for a snack and less than 600 mg for a meal.

Some foods that are very high in salt include:
- Frozen foods
- Fast foods
- Canned foods
- Soups/gravies
- Lunch meats
- Pickles
- Condiments
- Chips/pretzels
- Nuts

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