

Pulmonary Rehab for Beginners

Starting a pulmonary rehabilitation program is like going to school. The “classes” address subjects such as administering medications, stress management, and smoking cessation. The “teachers” are a multidisciplinary team of health care professionals.

But you don't have to be a whiz kid for pulmonary rehabilitation to help manage your symptoms and slow the progression of your pulmonary disease. While results vary, the goal is to increase your independence, decrease your hospitalizations, and improve your quality of life.

What to expect

The structure of pulmonary rehab programs varies; the majority of programs are held as group classes, but some are done individually. Most programs encourage family or friends to attend with you.

Before you begin, a pulmonary rehabilitation team member will talk with you about your chronic lung disease and its physical and emotional effect. They will determine whether you need testing such as pulmonary function tests and chest X-rays. They also may have you take a short quiz about lung diseases and ask you to set goals for your progress.

For your first class, wear comfortable clothing and walking shoes. Make sure to bring your fast-acting inhaler, supplemental oxygen equipment, and other prescribed medications.

A staff member will measure the distance you are able to walk in six minutes while a device called a pulse oximeter determines the oxygen saturation in your blood through a clip on your finger or a forehead sensor. The test results will help the rehabilitation team assess your functional exercise capacity and develop an exercise program tailored to your abilities.

Exercise training

As your weeks of pulmonary rehabilitation

progress, you will practice a regimen of stretching, aerobic activities like walking, and strength exercises using free weights and resistance bands. A typical exercise prescription emphasizes endurance training for 30 to 40 minutes repeated at least three times weekly, but preferably five to seven times a week.

It's important to exercise at home as well. This “homework” includes walking, bicycling, swimming, or other activities recommended by your rehabilitation team. Keep up this routine even after completing rehabilitation to ensure its long-term effectiveness. Patients who discontinue exercise

following rehabilitation typically return to their previous state of health within 12 to 18 months.

The rehabilitation team also will show you how to conserve energy and pace yourself during exercise and daily activities. They will demonstrate strategies to help reduce your shortness of breath.

Increasing Awareness

A comprehensive pulmonary rehabilitation program will teach you to pay attention to your body. You'll learn to prevent respiratory infections by avoiding crowds, getting flu or pneumonia shots, and using antibacterial wipes or gels.

Most pulmonary rehabilitation programs include 40 to 80 hours of sessions. Program costs vary greatly by location, but many therapies are covered by insurers. Check with your local pulmonary rehabilitation provider for further information.

With a little effort, you're sure to graduate pulmonary rehabilitation with flying colors. Just don't forget the homework. ■

Information provided by Lana Hilling, RCP, FAACVPR, pulmonary rehabilitation coordinator of John Muir Health in Concord, Ca. and adapted from National Lung Health Education Program guidelines.

Kristen Ziegler is assistant editor of ADVANCE. She can be reached at kziegler@merion.com.



notes

Your doctor or therapist has given you this patient education handout to further explain or remind you about an issue related to your health. This handout is a general guide only. If you have specific questions, discuss them with your doctor or therapist.

