COPD: Why one moderate exacerbation changes everything

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 7 September 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) management often involves a delicate balance between symptom control and exacerbation prevention. For many patients, dual bronchodilator therapy (LAMA/LABA) provides adequate relief, but the trajectory of the disease is rarely linear. The question for clinicians then becomes: at what point does a patient's clinical picture warrant a more aggressive approach, specifically moving to a single-inhaler triple therapy (SITT)?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The Pivot: A single moderate COPD exacerbation, even on dual bronchodilator therapy, indicates a need to re-evaluate and often intensify treatment.
- The Data: Triple therapy reduces exacerbation rates and improves lung function compared to dual bronchodilator regimens in appropriate patient groups.
- The Action: Consider stepping up to a SITT for patients experiencing one moderate exacerbation while on LAMA/LABA, particularly those with elevated eosinophil counts.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is a progressive, debilitating condition characterized by persistent respiratory symptoms and airflow limitation. Its natural history is punctuated by acute exacerbations, which are critical events that significantly impact quality of life, accelerate lung function decline, and increase mortality risk. Preventing these exacerbations is a cornerstone of effective COPD management, driving treatment decisions from initial diagnosis through advanced stages. Current guidelines generally advocate for a stepwise approach, beginning with bronchodilators and escalating therapy based on symptom burden and exacerbation history. For many patients, a long-acting muscarinic antagonist (LAMA) combined with a long-acting beta-agonist (LABA) in a dual bronchodilator regimen serves as the foundational maintenance therapy.

But the efficacy of dual bronchodilator therapy, while substantial for symptom control, does not universally prevent all exacerbations. Patients with a history of frequent exacerbations, or those with specific inflammatory phenotypes, often require more intensive treatment. The challenge for general practitioners and specialists alike is identifying the precise moment to transition a patient from a seemingly stable dual therapy to a more complex regimen, such as a single-inhaler triple therapy (SITT) which combines a LAMA, a LABA, and an inhaled corticosteroid (ICS). This decision point is not always clear-cut, especially when a patient experiences their first exacerbation while already on dual therapy.

Understanding the Exacerbation Threshold

A moderate COPD exacerbation is typically defined by an acute worsening of respiratory symptoms requiring systemic corticosteroids or antibiotics, or both. It does not necessitate hospitalisation, but it represents a significant clinical event. The occurrence of even one such moderate exacerbation while a patient is already receiving dual bronchodilator therapy should serve as a strong signal for treatment intensification. This is a departure from older paradigms that might have waited for multiple exacerbations or more severe events before considering triple therapy.

The rationale for this earlier intervention stems from the understanding that each exacerbation, regardless of severity, contributes to disease progression and carries a cumulative burden. Preventing subsequent exacerbations becomes paramount. Triple therapy, by adding an ICS, aims to address the inflammatory component of COPD more comprehensively, particularly in patients who exhibit features of airway inflammation, such as elevated blood eosinophil counts. This approach acknowledges that COPD is not solely a disease of airflow obstruction but also one of chronic inflammation, which can be corticosteroid-responsive in a subset of patients.

The Role of Eosinophils in Treatment Decisions

The decision to step up to a SITT is not merely about the number of exacerbations, but also about patient characteristics that predict a better response to ICS. Blood eosinophil count has emerged as a biomarker in this context. Patients with higher baseline eosinophil counts (e.g., ≥100 cells/μL or ≥300 cells/μL, depending on the specific guideline or study) are more likely to benefit from the addition of an ICS to their bronchodilator regimen. This is because eosinophilic inflammation is often associated with a greater propensity for exacerbations and a better response to the anti-inflammatory effects of corticosteroids.

For a patient on LAMA/LABA who experiences a moderate exacerbation, assessing their blood eosinophil count is an important step before initiating SITT to ensure treatment effectiveness. If the eosinophil count is low, the benefit of adding an ICS may be less pronounced, and the potential risks, such as an increased risk of pneumonia, might outweigh the benefits. Conversely, a high eosinophil count strengthens the argument for stepping up to triple therapy, as these patients are precisely the population where ICS has been shown to be most effective in reducing exacerbations. This approach allows for more personalized medicine, targeting the right therapy to the right patient.

Mechanism of Action and Clinical Benefits

Single-inhaler triple therapy combines the bronchodilatory effects of a LAMA and a LABA with the anti-inflammatory action of an ICS. LAMAs work by blocking muscarinic receptors in the airways, leading to bronchodilation and reduced mucus secretion. LABAs stimulate beta-2 adrenergic receptors, also causing bronchodilation. The combination of these two classes provides maximal bronchodilation, addressing the airflow limitation that is central to COPD. The addition of an ICS, a potent anti-inflammatory agent, targets the underlying airway inflammation. This triple combination aims to provide superior symptom control, improve lung function, and, most importantly, reduce the frequency and severity of exacerbations compared to dual bronchodilator therapy alone.

The convenience of a single inhaler for all three medications is also a significant factor. Adherence to complex medication regimens is a persistent challenge in chronic diseases like COPD. A SITT simplifies the treatment schedule, potentially improving patient compliance and, by extension, clinical outcomes. This practical aspect should not be underestimated in real-world clinical practice. For a deeper dive into how triple therapy can optimize outcomes, consider reviewing recent discussions on triple therapy.

Potential Risks and Considerations

While SITT offers clear benefits for certain patient populations, it is not without potential drawbacks. The primary concern with the addition of an ICS is the increased risk of pneumonia. This risk is generally dose-dependent and varies among different ICS molecules. Clinicians must weigh the exacerbation reduction benefits against this potential side effect, especially in patients who may be at higher risk for pneumonia, such as those with a history of recurrent infections or significant comorbidities. Regular monitoring for signs and symptoms of pneumonia is essential when patients are on ICS-containing regimens.

Other potential side effects of ICS include oral candidiasis (thrush) and dysphonia, which can often be mitigated with proper inhaler technique and rinsing the mouth after use. Long-term use of high-dose ICS can also be associated with systemic effects, such as osteoporosis and cataracts, though these are less common with the lower doses typically used in COPD. The decision to initiate SITT should always involve a careful discussion with the patient about these risks and benefits, ensuring informed consent and shared decision-making. The Oxford Handbook of Respiratory Medicine provides a concise reference for managing such complex decisions.

When Dual Therapy Remains Appropriate

Not every patient with COPD requires triple therapy. For those with minimal symptoms and no history of exacerbations, or those whose exacerbations are infrequent and mild, dual bronchodilator therapy may remain the most appropriate choice. The goal is to provide the least intensive effective therapy, minimizing side effects and treatment burden. The step-up approach is specifically for patients whose disease activity, particularly exacerbations, indicates that their current regimen is insufficient.

Patients with very low blood eosinophil counts (e.g., dual role of IL-33 in COPD inflammation can further inform these decisions.

The Unanswered Question

While the evidence for stepping up to SITT after one moderate exacerbation is compelling for certain patient profiles, the long-term impact on overall mortality and the optimal duration of triple therapy remain areas of ongoing investigation. Whether an initial period of SITT can be de-escalated in patients who achieve sustained exacerbation-free periods is also a question that warrants further research.

> **CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS**
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> The shift in clinical thinking regarding COPD exacerbations is clear: one moderate event on dual bronchodilator therapy is no longer merely an inconvenience, but a critical inflection point. GPs and specialists must now view this as a prompt to re-evaluate, rather than simply treating the acute episode and returning to the status quo. The evidence points towards a more proactive approach, particularly when eosinophil counts suggest an ICS-responsive phenotype.
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> This means a more rigorous assessment of exacerbation history and blood eosinophil levels should become standard practice for patients on LAMA/LABA who experience a breakthrough event. Waiting for a second or third exacerbation before intensifying therapy risks further lung function decline and increased morbidity. The convenience of a single-inhaler triple therapy should also factor into adherence considerations, simplifying complex regimens for patients.

> But the increased risk of pneumonia with ICS cannot be ignored. Clinicians must carefully balance the benefits of exacerbation reduction against this known side effect, especially in vulnerable populations. This isn't a blanket recommendation for all, but a targeted strategy for those most likely to benefit, underscoring the need for personalized medicine in COPD management.
> Pharmaceutical companies developing these SITTs have a responsibility to provide clear guidance on patient selection and risk mitigation, moving beyond broad marketing claims. The real-world effectiveness hinges on appropriate patient identification and careful monitoring, ensuring that the right patients receive this intensified therapy while minimizing adverse events.

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