



COPD and Asthma

What you need to know

Are COPD and asthma the same thing?

No. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (also called COPD) and asthma are both diseases of the lungs that make it hard for you to breathe. However, they are different diseases. COPD is caused by damage to the lungs over a long period of time. It includes two main conditions: chronic bronchitis and emphysema (say: “em-fa-see-ma”). Most people who have COPD have both of these conditions. The symptoms of COPD usually develop in people older than age 40.

Asthma is a disease that affects the part of the lungs called the bronchial tubes (also called airways). If you have asthma, your airways are extra sensitive to the things you are allergic to (called allergens) and to other irritating things you breathe in (called irritants). These things are sometimes called “triggers.” Being exposed to triggers can cause an asthma attack.

Smoking tobacco and secondhand smoke can be triggers that irritate symptoms of asthma and help cause COPD. Substances released when inhaling tobacco smoke can cause an attack in a person who has asthma. The irritation over long periods can cause the onset of COPD.

What is an asthma attack?

An asthma attack happens when excess mucus causes your airways to swell and tighten. Asthma attacks can be mild, moderate, or severe. Symptoms of an asthma attack include wheezing (breathing that makes a hoarse, squeaky, or whistling sound), coughing, shortness of breath (breathless feeling), and a tight feeling in the chest. A person who is having an asthma attack may have trouble sleeping because of these symptoms.

What are the symptoms of COPD?

COPD can cause a variety of symptoms, including the following:

- Chronic (long-lasting) cough
- A cough that produces mucus
- Shortness of breath
- A tight feeling in the chest
- Wheezing

At first, you may have no symptoms or only mild symptoms, but COPD is a progressive disease. This means that the symptoms start slowly and get worse over time. COPD symptoms develop over the course of many years.

How does my doctor know whether I have COPD or asthma?

Talk to your doctor if you have any symptoms of COPD or asthma. These diseases are not treated in exactly the same way, so it is important to have a correct diagnosis.

Because COPD and asthma cause similar symptoms, your doctor will give you a physical exam and ask specific questions about your symptoms. For example, he or she might ask whether your symptoms get worse at a certain time of day. Your doctor will also ask about your medical history and your family’s history of breathing problems.

It is especially important for your doctor to know if you smoke or if you have had a lot of exposure to irritants over a long period of time. Common causes of COPD include tobacco smoke (including secondhand smoke), and chemical fumes, gases or vapors.

Your doctor will also measure how well your lungs are working (called lung function). This can be checked with a simple breathing test called a spirometry test.

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How is COPD treated?

Treatment for COPD aims to help control your symptoms, and reduce your risk of complications. You will need to make lifestyle changes and use prescribed medical treatments.

Stop smoking. If you use tobacco products and have COPD, the most important thing you can do is quit smoking. This will help to stop the damaging effects of cigarette smoke to your lungs and it could slow the progression of the disease. Talk to your doctor about how to quit smoking.

Help yourself breathe better. Avoid irritants that will make your symptoms worse, such as high ozone levels and air pollution (for example, motor vehicle exhaust). Also, avoid breathing in chemicals or dust.

Know how to use your medicine. Your doctor may prescribe one or more medicines to help you breathe more easily. He or she will tell you how to take your medicine. It is important to follow your doctor's instructions carefully so that your lungs receive the right amount of medicine. Only use the medicines that your doctor has prescribed for you.

Get recommended vaccines. Vaccines can help prevent certain respiratory infections, such as influenza (the flu) and pneumonia. These infections can make COPD symptoms worse or cause more lung damage. Talk to your doctor about when and how often you should get vaccines.

Make healthy lifestyle changes. Even small lifestyle changes can help control your COPD symptoms. Your doctor can tell you about pulmonary rehabilitation programs for people who have COPD. These programs provide information and support as you make healthy changes. In a rehabilitation program, you can work with a team of health care professionals to learn more about your disease, receive counseling, and create exercise and eating plans tailored to your needs.

How is asthma treated?

Treatment for asthma involves avoiding things that cause asthma attacks, keeping track of your symptoms, and taking medicine. Your doctor will show you how to use a peak flow meter. A peak flow meter is a handheld device that measures how fast you can blow air out of your lungs. Measuring your peak flow regularly can help you tell whether your asthma is getting worse.

Ask your doctor for written directions about how to prevent and treat asthma attacks at home. These written instructions are called your "asthma action plan." It will include information on specific allergens and irritants that you should avoid, as well as what to do if you have a severe asthma attack.

Asthma medicines can generally be divided into two groups: medicines to prevent attacks (called controller medicines) and medicines to treat attacks (sometimes called rescue medicines). Most people need to take more than one type of medicine to control their asthma. People who have asthma do not all take the same medicine. Your asthma action plan will tell you how to take your controller and rescue medicines based on your peak flow meter readings. Your doctor will show you how to take your medicine so that your lungs receive the right amount.

MORE INFORMATION

Find more information about COPD (including information about the spirometry test) online at <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/chronic-obstructive-pulmonary-disease.html>.

Find more information about asthma (including information about asthma action plans, how to take asthma medicine, and questions to ask when your asthma doesn't get better) online at <http://familydoctor.org/familydoctor/en/diseases-conditions/asthma.html>.