

## COPD: What You Should Know

### What is COPD?

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, is a lung disease that makes it hard for you to breathe. Over time, your lungs become irritated or damaged. Mucus may block airways. This makes it hard for air to get through. The air sacs in the lungs may become stiff and unable to hold enough air.

### Who gets COPD and why?

COPD is usually caused by smoking. It takes time to develop. Most people with COPD are smokers 40 years or older. Younger people can also get it, especially if a family member was diagnosed at younger than 40 years. You may be at risk even if you have never smoked. COPD can be caused by exposure to fumes, smoke, or dust for a long time.

### How do I know if I have COPD?

COPD develops slowly, so you could have it for many years before you notice symptoms. The most common symptoms are coughing, wheezing, and feeling short of breath (like you cannot get enough air). If you have a cough or wheeze for at least three months, you may have COPD, especially if you are a smoker 40 years or older. A cough or shortness of breath that lasts a long time can also be caused

by other diseases, such as allergies, asthma, cancer, and heart problems. If you experience any cough or shortness of breath for more than three months, you should seek medical attention.

### How can my doctor tell if I have COPD?

Your doctor may do a test called spirometry (speh-ROM-eh-tree). In this test, you will blow hard into a machine to measure how well you can breathe.

### How is COPD treated?

There is no cure for COPD. The damage to your airways and lungs cannot be fixed. But, there are things you can do to feel better and slow the damage. Most importantly, you should quit smoking. Ask your doctor to help you with this.

Your doctor may give you medicines that you breathe into your lungs. Medicines called bronchodilators (bron-ko-DYE-lay-tors) relax the muscle around your airways to help air get through. Medicines called steroids help stop the irritation in your airways. They are only used if you continue to have shortness of breath and cough after being treated with bronchodilators. Extra oxygen can help if you have very bad COPD. Contact your doctor right away if your symptoms suddenly get worse.

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Adapted with permission from Grimes GC, Manning JL, Patel P, et al. COPD: what you should know [patient handout]. *Am Fam Physician*. 2007;76(8):1151-1152.

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## COPD: What You Should Know *(continued)*

### What should I do if I have COPD?

If you have COPD, follow these steps:

1. Quit smoking. If you do not quit, you will keep damaging your lungs. Even secondhand smoke can make your symptoms worse.
2. Exercise every day. You can start by walking 20 minutes a day. Ask your doctor to help you make an exercise plan.
3. Eat a healthful diet. If you are overweight, losing weight may help your symptoms. Ask your doctor to help you make a diet plan.
4. Take your medicines as directed. At least twice a year, talk with your doctor or pharmacist about how to take your medicines.
5. Get a flu shot every year and get a pneumonia shot.
6. If you have not been screened for lung cancer, you should ask your doctor about screening.

### Where can I get more information?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease  
<https://www.cdc.gov/copd/index.html>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Vaccine Information for Adults  
<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/adults/index.html>

COPD information for caregivers and patients  
<https://www.copd.com>

Resources to help you quit smoking  
<https://smokefree.gov/>

### Notes from your family doctor

June 2023