

Living with COPD



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What is COPD?

With chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), the lungs are continually inflamed (red and swollen). COPD is a serious lung disease that makes it hard to breathe. It is also called emphysema or chronic bronchitis. COPD is a progressive disease. This means the symptoms usually get worse over time. While there is no cure for COPD, treatment is available to manage the symptoms and improve quality of life.

Smoking is the most common cause of COPD. Other causes of COPD include:

- Indoor or outdoor air pollution
- Asthma
- Occupational exposure to noxious fumes
- History of severe respiratory infections
- Genetics

COPD usually leads to breathing problems and makes it hard for you to do your daily activities. Sometimes your COPD symptoms may be much worse than normal with an increase in coughing, shortness of breath, or in the amount of and change in the color of phlegm. This is called an “exacerbation.” When it happens, you need to take action. This can range from adjusting your medicine to going to the hospital.

Pulmonary rehabilitation

Pulmonary rehabilitation includes education, exercise, relaxation, breathing techniques, nutritional advice, emotional support and coping skills. Your doctor may recommend some of these lifestyle changes to help delay symptoms and prevent exacerbations:

Quit smoking

Quitting smoking is the best thing you can do to slow the progress of COPD. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you need help quitting smoking. You can also visit www.smokefree.gov or call **1-800-QUIT-NOW**. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield Service Benefit Plan has a free tobacco cessation program. Visit www.fepblue.org/tobacco for more information.

Nutrition

Keeping a healthy body weight is very important. Being overweight or underweight can cause problems. Ask your doctor or pharmacist what a healthy body weight is for you. Your doctor may also refer you to a nutritionist.

Vaccines

Respiratory infections are the most common cause of COPD exacerbations. Ask your doctor if you should receive vaccines for pneumonia and a yearly flu shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also recommends vaccination for Tdap, shingles, RSV, and COVID-19.

Education

Learning more about COPD can make you feel better about managing your condition, as well

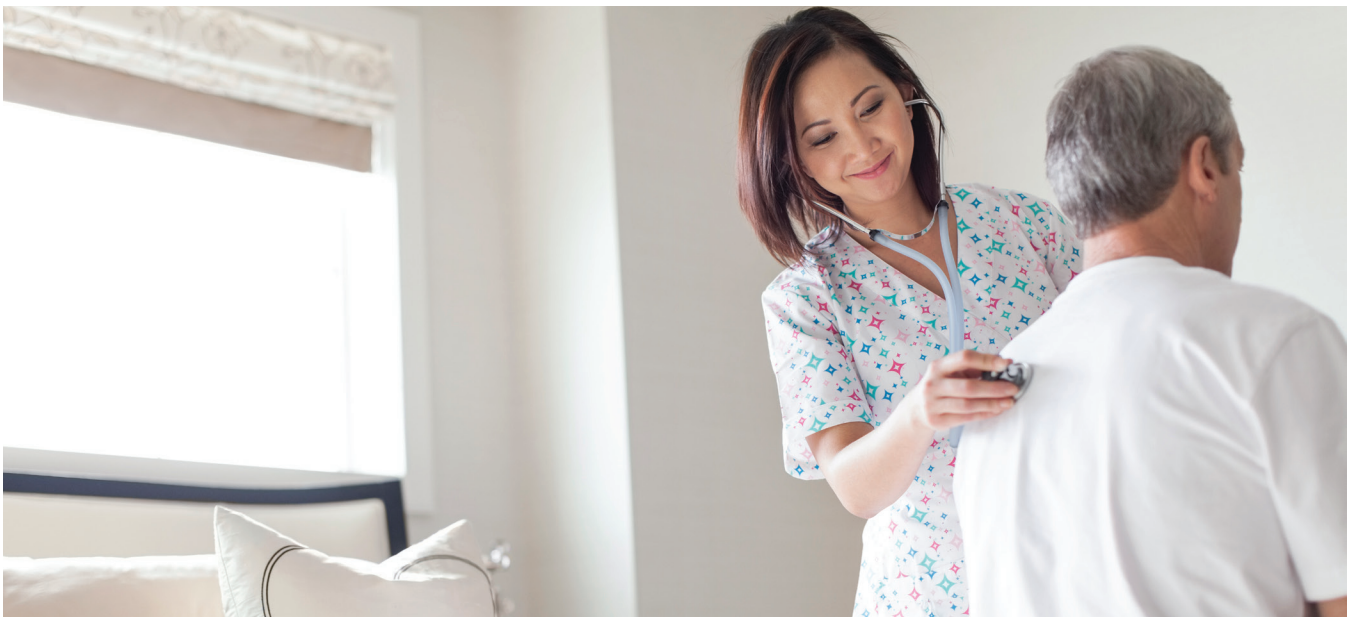
as understanding when to seek help for an exacerbation. Education can help you improve your skills, your ability to cope with illness and your general health.

Regular exercise

Patients at all stages of COPD benefit from exercise. Exercising helps strengthen the lungs and increases oxygen intake. Some benefits include a greater ability to exercise, less shortness of breath, less depression and fewer hospital stays. You need to take part in an exercise program for at least six weeks to see the benefits. The longer you keep it up, the better your results can be. Your doctor will probably ask you to continue exercising to keep seeing the benefits. Aerobic exercise, such as walking and biking, can help improve your breathing. Ask your doctor if it is safe for you to exercise at home or if you need a medically supervised exercise program.

Medicine

Medicine helps you manage COPD by reducing symptoms and helping you breathe easier. Your doctor may prescribe a combination of short-acting and/or long-acting medicines. Some medicines need to be taken every day. Others may only need to be taken when you



are having symptoms. Know when to use each medicine. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you have questions.

Many of the medications are taken using inhaler devices. Inhaler technique is very important to manage symptoms. Ask your doctor or pharmacist to provide instructions and demonstrate proper use of your inhaler. A spacer device can be used to help reduce side effects and improve medication delivery with some inhalers.

Exacerbations

Ask your doctor about making a COPD action plan for exacerbations. This will help you know when to take extra medicine, call the doctor, and/or go to the hospital.

Your doctor may also give you extra medicines to keep on hand and take if you are having an exacerbation. These medicines may include short-acting bronchodilators (such as albuterol), oral corticosteroids (such as prednisone) and antibiotics (such as azithromycin).

Pay attention to how you are feeling every day to avoid having more serious health problems. Call your doctor if you have symptoms of:

An exacerbation

- Using your “as needed” medicine more often than usual
- Cannot walk as far as usual
- Cannot do your regular daily activities
- Feeling tired or weak
- Swelling in your feet or ankles
- Blue color around your lips or fingernails

An infection

- Coughing up more mucus than usual
- Mucus changes color (especially green or yellow)
- Thicker than usual mucus



- Coughing up blood
- Fever

Symptoms

At first, symptoms may seem mild. But over time, symptoms can get worse. You may find yourself trying to manage some chronic symptoms including:

- Persistent cough
- Shortness of breath
- Gasping
- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Mucus

How severe is your COPD?

Your doctor may have given you a breathing test called a spirometry. This is a simple test to measure the amount of air a person can breathe out. It also measures the amount of time it takes to do so. A COPD assessment test (CAT) is often used to measure how severe your symptoms are.

Oxygen

People with severe COPD who do not have enough oxygen in their blood may need oxygen therapy. The oxygen tank supplies more air to the lungs and blood than breathing alone. Be sure to use the oxygen tank if your doctor prescribes it for you. Some people with COPD may only need oxygen at certain times, when their blood oxygen is low. These times can include:

- During exercise: due to increased oxygen demand by the body
- During air travel: due to decreased oxygen in the air
- During exacerbations: due to increased breathing problems

Oxygen therapy helps people with severe COPD breathe easier and feel better.



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