

Breathe Easier - Your Guide to COPD

What is COPD?

COPD is a medical term that stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease.

- The word 'Chronic' means it won't go away.
- The word 'Obstructive' means partly blocked.
- The word 'Pulmonary' means in the lungs.
- The word 'Disease' means an illness.

- Many people with COPD have a combination of emphysema, chronic bronchitis and asthma.
- You may also hear COPD referred to as COAD (Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease), COLD (Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease) or CAL (Chronic Airways Limitation).
- COPD cannot be cured or reversed, but it can be treated.

Who can get COPD?

- Smokers or past smokers are at major risk of getting COPD
- Some people with COPD worked or lived in places that were very dusty or smoky for many years.
- COPD cannot be caught from someone else, but is sometimes inherited.

What are the symptoms?

- Feeling puffed or short of breath when doing things like climbing stairs, walking up a hill or even having a shower.
- Coughing.
- A build-up in the lungs of a sticky substance called phlegm which you swallow or cough-up.

Symptoms of COPD often don't show up until after the age of 40.

What causes shortness of breath?

The air passages in the lungs are damaged

Air flows in and out of your lungs through thousands of small air passages called bronchial tubes. When you have COPD, these tubes become narrower, making it harder to breathe. Medication can help your tubes to work better, opening them up and making breathing easier. COPD causes tubes to narrow, medication can help tubes work better.

Breathing muscles do not work well

With COPD, your lungs become larger than normal, so the breathing muscles around the outside of the lungs (e.g. the diaphragm and chest wall muscles) become stretched and have to work harder.

This means that there is more effort involved in breathing and it makes you feel breathless. These muscles help you take deep breaths to get plenty of oxygen. With COPD you can only take smaller breaths.

Arm & leg muscles tire

The muscles in your arms and legs tire easily and this may make your shortness of breath worse.

How does a doctor test for COPD?

- COPD is tested with a simple breathing test (called spirometry).
- You blow into a small machine called a spirometer.
- The results of the test tell the doctor whether you have COPD and how bad it is.
- The test helps distinguish COPD from asthma.

The facts: Australia

- Almost 1 in 7 people over 40 have COPD.
- COPD is a leading cause of death after heart disease, stroke and cancer.
- More people are dying from COPD each year.
- COPD is the second leading cause of avoidable hospital admissions.
- COPD is preventable and treatable.

The good news

The good news is that by following the steps below, you can reduce ALL your symptoms and slow down the damage being done to your lungs.

Step 1. Stop smoking

- This is the single most important thing you can do to help yourself. Most people need help to quit.
- The sooner you stop smoking the longer you are likely to live – it is that simple.
- Keep smoking and your health will get worse far quicker than if you quit.

Step 2. Seek help from health professionals

- Talk with your health professional (doctor, nurse, physiotherapist, pharmacist etc.) to understand how COPD is affecting you and what you can do about it.
- If you are, or were a smoker, do not hide this from your doctor.
- Learn how your medications work and then take them correctly.
- Make a plan with your doctor so you know what to do if your COPD gets worse suddenly.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions.

Step 3. Boost your health

- Join a COPD exercise and education program, often called pulmonary rehabilitation. This is one of the best treatments for COPD. The Lung Foundation Australia (Lung Foundation) can help you find the program nearest you.
- Exercise safely and regularly. Walking is an excellent exercise. You should check with your health professional about a suitable exercise plan.
- A new Lung Foundation program called Lungs in Action is a fun and safe community based exercise class for those who have completed pulmonary rehabilitation. The Lung Foundation can tell you if there is a program near you.
- Maintain a healthy weight. Being overweight or underweight can place a strain on your body. A healthy weight plus a healthy diet will help you to stay stronger and have more energy.

This brochure is one in a series produced by Lung Foundation Australia to provide information on lung disease, its treatment and related issues. The information published by Lung Foundation Australia is designed to be used as a guide only, is not intended or implied to be a substitute for professional medical treatment and is presented for the sole purpose of disseminating information to reduce lung disease.

Any information relating to medication brand names is correct at the time of printing. Lung Foundation Australia has no control or responsibility for the availability of medications, which may occasionally be discontinued or withdrawn.

Please consult your family doctor or specialist respiratory physician if you have further questions relating to the information contained in this leaflet. For details of patient support groups in Australia please call 1800 654 301.

Step 4. Protect against flare-ups (exacerbations)

Because you have COPD, you may be more likely to get chest infections. Protect yourself by:

- Having flu and pneumococcal vaccines regularly.
- Acting quickly if your symptoms are worse. Check the plan you made with your doctor so you know exactly what to do and what medicines to take.

Step 5. Join a support group

The Lung Foundation supports a network of COPD support groups right around Australia. Group members help each other by sharing their COPD stories, things that work and friendship

Working with your health professional

Find a team of health professionals you like and are happy to work with on a regular basis. The more they know about you and your symptoms, the better job they can do working with you to manage your COPD.

Ask your health professional to prepare a plan of the things you can do to control your COPD and make your breathing easier. Their plan may follow this structure:

C	Confirm diagnosis Test to see if you have COPD
O	Optimise function Ways to help make breathing easier including a rehabilitation program
P	Prevent deterioration Doing everything possible to stop you getting worse
D	Develop self management plan A plan for managing your COPD
X	Manage eXacerbations What to do if you get worse suddenly

It is important to visit your health professional for regular check-ups, or if your symptoms change.

Take action today

COPD is a serious disease that can have a big impact on the quality of your life. However, if you follow the 5 steps outlined in this brochure, it is possible to reduce your symptoms and slow down the damage to your lungs.

Don't let your breathing get any worse. If you are a smoker, decide today to stop and take control of your COPD.

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Further information

Further detailed information on COPD is available:

- Save your Breath: Information for people recently diagnosed with COPD
- Better Living with COPD: A Patient Guide
- Getting Started on Home Oxygen

Here to help

The Lung Foundation's Information and Support Centre can help you to find out more about COPD and the help that is available to you. Contact us by:

- Phoning 1800 654 301 free-call
- Emailing enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au

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