

# COPD

## LEARN MORE BREATHE BETTER®

A program of the National Institutes of Health.



## NOW THAT YOU KNOW IT'S COPD, HERE'S HOW TO BREATHE BETTER.

You have taken the important step of being aware of your symptoms, and seeing your doctor or health care provider for testing and a diagnosis. While COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) is a serious lung disease that worsens over time, your provider can suggest treatment options and ways to help you manage COPD. Here are some things you can do now to breathe better and improve your quality of life.

### 1) QUIT SMOKING.

If you smoke, quitting is the best thing you can do to prevent more damage to your lungs. Ask your provider about new options for quitting. Many resources to help are available online. Visit [smokefree.gov](http://smokefree.gov); [lungusa.org](http://lungusa.org); or call **1-800-QUIT NOW** for more information.

### 2) AVOID EXPOSURE TO POLLUTANTS.

Try to stay away from other things that could irritate your lungs, like dust and strong fumes. Stay indoors when the outside air quality is poor, and avoid places where there might be cigarette smoke.

### 3) VISIT YOUR PROVIDER REGULARLY.

See your doctor or health care provider on a regular basis. Bring a list of all medications you are taking to each office visit. If your current symptoms worsen, or if you have new ones, be sure to tell your doctor.

## IT'S SERIOUS, BUT YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

COPD—also known as emphysema or chronic bronchitis—is a serious disease that partially blocks the airways, or tubes, that carry air in and out of the lungs. It worsens over time, making it harder to breathe.

COPD is a leading cause of death in the United States. There are currently more than 16 million people who have been diagnosed and several additional millions likely have it, but don't know it.

With proper diagnosis and increasingly better treatments for COPD, there is reason for hope. Be sure to follow your provider's recommendations so you can manage your COPD, breathe better and have a better quality of life.



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**Talking with your doctor is good for your breathing.**

To get the best treatment for your COPD, it's important that you speak honestly with your doctor or health care provider at each visit. Let them know what's really going on with your breathing. Don't hesitate to ask questions about your disease, symptoms and treatment options. Read our *Patient Tips* factsheet for help on getting the most from each visit.

**4) FOLLOW TREATMENT ADVICE.**

Take your medications exactly as prescribed. And follow your provider's advice on how to treat your COPD.

**5) TAKE PRECAUTIONS AGAINST THE FLU.**

It can cause serious problems for people with COPD. So, do your best to avoid crowds during flu season. Consider getting a flu shot every year. And ask your provider about the pneumonia vaccine.

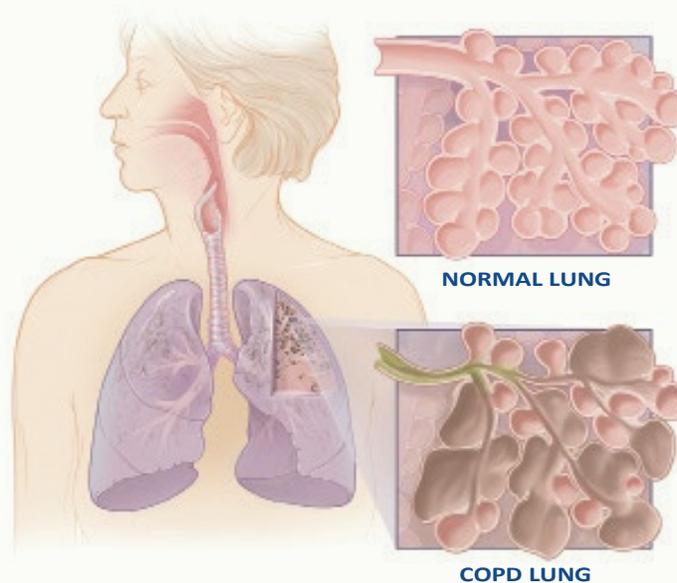
**6) SEEK SUPPORT FROM OTHERS WHO HAVE COPD.**

See if your local hospital has a COPD support group. You can also find a very active COPD community online. Family members can be supportive, too, as you learn to live with and manage your COPD.

## HOW DOES COPD AFFECT BREATHING?

When lungs are healthy, the airways and air sacs have an elastic, flexible quality. They expand to fill with air and then bounce back to their original shape when air is exhaled. This elasticity helps to retain the normal lung structure and also helps the air to move quickly in and out.

In people with COPD, the air sacs no longer bounce back to their original shape, and the airways can become swollen or thicker than normal. COPD can also cause increased mucus production. The airways can become partially blocked, making it even harder to get air in and out of the lungs.



## DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT OF COPD

### IT STARTS WITH A TEST CALLED SPIROMETRY

It's one of the best and most common ways to help diagnose COPD. Using a machine called a spirometer, this noninvasive breathing test measures the amount of air a person can blow out of the lungs (volume) and how fast (flow). The results help your doctor assess how well your lungs are working and the best course of treatment.

Next, your doctor may suggest one of more of these treatment options:

### MEDICATIONS

Two of the most common are bronchodilators and inhaled steroids, but your provider may recommend other types of medications for your COPD. Bronchodilators usually come in an inhaler and work to relax and open up the muscles around your airways, making it easier to breathe. Inhaled steroids help prevent the airways from getting inflamed.

### PULMONARY REHABILITATION

This is a program that helps you learn to exercise and manage your disease with physical activity and counseling. It can help you stay active and carry out your day-to-day tasks.

### PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TRAINING

Your provider, or a pulmonary therapist your doctor recommends, may teach you some activities to help your arms and legs get stronger and/or breathing exercises that strengthen the muscles needed for breathing.

### OXYGEN TREATMENT

If your COPD is severe, your doctor might suggest that you breathe oxygen some or all of the time to help with shortness of breath.

### SURGERY

In some severe cases of COPD, providers may suggest lung surgery to improve breathing and alleviate some symptoms.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOUR SYMPTOMS SUDDENLY WORSEN

Symptoms of COPD can get worse all of a sudden. When this happens, it is much harder to catch your breath. You might also have...

- Chest tightness.
- More coughing.
- A change in your cough (becomes more productive; more mucus is expelled).
- A fever.

There could be many causes for symptoms getting worse, such as a lung infection or heart disease related to severe lung damage. The best thing to do is call your health care provider right away.



## WHEN TO GET EMERGENCY HELP

Seek emergency help if your usual medications aren't working and:

- It is unusually hard to walk or talk (such as difficulty completing a sentence).
- Your heart is beating very fast or irregularly.
- Your lips or fingernails become gray or blue.
- Your breathing is fast and hard, even when you are using your medication.

## BE PREPARED.

### HAVE VITAL INFORMATION ON HAND.

Think of everything you or others would need to know in a medical emergency, and have it all together in an easy-to-grab place. Things like:

- A list of all medications you are taking for COPD and other conditions.
- Contact information for your doctor or health care provider, including name, office address, office and emergency phone numbers.
- Directions to the doctor's/provider's office.
- Directions to the nearest hospital.
- People to contact if you are unable to speak or drive yourself there.
- Health insurance card or information.

For more information about diagnosing, treating, managing and living with COPD, visit [COPD.nih.gov](https://www.copd.nih.gov) or contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at [nhlbi.nih.gov](https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov).

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**BREATHING BETTER**  
WITH A COPD DIAGNOSIS