

Focus on:

# Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

REFERENCE



*“Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a major cause of disability, and it’s the fourth leading cause of death in the United States. More than 12 million people are currently diagnosed with COPD. An additional 12 million likely have the disease and don’t even know it.”*

~National Heart Lung and Blood Institute

COPD is a condition caused by damage to the lungs. If you have COPD, the tubes that carry air to and from your lungs are obstructed, making it difficult to breathe.

## What Causes COPD?

Most cases of COPD develop after long-term exposure to lung irritants that damage the lungs and the airways.

In the U.S., the most common irritant that causes COPD is cigarette smoke. Pipe, cigar and other types of tobacco smoke can cause COPD as well, especially if the smoke is inhaled. Secondhand smoke can irritate the lungs and contribute to COPD too.

Breathing in air pollution and chemical fumes or dust from the environment or workplace also can contribute to COPD.

## Signs and Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of COPD include:

- › An ongoing cough or a cough that produces large amounts of mucus (often called “smoker’s cough”)
- › Shortness of breath, especially with physical activity
- › Wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe)
- › Chest tightness

These symptoms often occur years before the flow of air into and out of the lungs declines. However, not everyone who has these symptoms has COPD. Likewise, not everyone who has COPD has these symptoms. Some of the symptoms of COPD are similar to the symptoms of other diseases and conditions. Your doctor can determine if you have COPD.

If you have COPD, you may have frequent colds or flu. If your COPD is severe, you may have the following symptoms:

- › Swelling in your ankles, feet, or legs
- › A bluish color on your lips due to low levels of oxygen in your blood
- › Shortness of breath

COPD symptoms usually slowly worsen over time. At first, if symptoms are mild, you may not notice them, or you may adjust your lifestyle to make breathing easier. For example, you may take the elevator instead of the stairs.



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How severe your symptoms are depends on how much lung damage you have. If you keep smoking, the damage will occur faster than if you stop smoking. In severe COPD, you may have other symptoms, such as weight loss and lower muscle endurance.

**“If you have COPD, the most important step you can take is to quit smoking.”**

## TIPS



### Prevention

The best way to prevent COPD is to not start smoking or to quit smoking before you develop the disease. Smoking is the leading cause of COPD.

If you smoke, talk to your doctor about programs and products that can help you quit. Many hospitals have programs that help people quit smoking, or hospital staff can refer you to a program.

Also, try to avoid secondhand smoke and other lung irritants that can contribute to COPD, such as air pollution, chemical fumes and dust.

### Slowing the progress

If you have COPD, the most important step you can take is to quit smoking. This can help prevent complications and slow the progress of the disease. You also should avoid exposure to the lung irritants mentioned above.

Follow your treatments for COPD exactly as your doctor prescribes. They can help you breathe easier, stay more active and avoid or manage severe symptoms.

Talk with your doctor about whether and when you should get flu and pneumonia vaccines. These vaccines can lower your chances of getting these illnesses, which are major health risks for people who have COPD.

### Treatment

Currently, COPD cannot be cured. However, treatments and lifestyle changes can help you feel better, stay more active and slow the progress of the disease.

Quitting smoking is the most important step you can take to treat COPD. Other treatments for COPD may include medicines, vaccines, pulmonary rehabilitation, oxygen therapy, surgery and managing complications.

The goals of COPD treatment are to:

- › Relieve your symptoms
- › Slow the progress of the disease
- › Improve your exercise tolerance (your ability to stay active)
- › Prevent and treat complications
- › Improve your overall health

**For more information on COPD, log onto the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute at [www.nhlbi.nih.org](http://www.nhlbi.nih.org)**

**For more information about Nationwide Better Health visit [nwbetterhealth.com](http://nwbetterhealth.com). Or contact your benefits representative.**



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