

The family library

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Understanding COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

What is COPD?

COPD, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, is an incurable disease that gets worse over time. COPD can cause coughing that produces large amounts of mucus, wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and other symptoms.

Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of COPD. Most people who have COPD smoke or used to smoke. Long-term exposure to other lung irritants, such as air pollution, chemical fumes, or dust, also may contribute to COPD.

COPD includes two main conditions: 1) emphysema, and 2) chronic bronchitis. With emphysema, the walls of the air sacs of the lungs are damaged which makes it hard to breathe. With chronic bronchitis the lining of the airways is constantly irritated and inflamed, which causes the lining to thicken. Thick mucus forms in the airways, again, making it hard to breathe.

What are the symptoms of COPD?

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
- Chest tightness

Because these symptoms are similar to the symptoms of other diseases and conditions, the patient must be evaluated and diagnosed by a doctor. Individuals with COPD may have more frequent colds or influenza. Swelling (called edema) in the ankles, feet, or legs may occur with severe COPD, as well as cyanosis (bluish color) of the lips due to a low oxygen level in the blood, accompanied by shortness of breath.

Understanding COPD (cont.)

(Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)



Diagnosis and Treatment

The doctor will do a careful patient history and physical examination. He may order a chest x-ray and breathing tests (called pulmonary functions tests) to assess the severity of the disease. He may also order a sputum culture (spitting into a cup) to make sure that there is no bacteria in the sample that could cause an infection and worsening symptoms.

Treatment includes medications like inhalers and steroids to improve breathing and reduce inflammation in the airways. Medications may also be ordered that help promote the removal of mucus. As symptoms worsen, the physician may order oxygen therapy for the patient.

What should I Know?

Because COPD causes shortness of breath, the patient is often tired and will fatigue easily. The COPD patient may also have a poor appetite because, just like you, it's hard to eat and breathe at the same time, so frequent, small meals are better than three large meals. The COPD patient may not sleep well at night because they rest a lot during the day. Alcoholic beverages, caffeine products or other stimulants should be avoided before bedtime.

The COPD patient is at a high risk for a lung infection. Any signs of worsening symptoms should be reported to the healthcare provider.

If a patient is overweight, he or she should lose weight and if the patient smokes, he should quit.

The doctor may recommend a pulmonary rehabilitation program, which can be very beneficial for the COPD patient and includes exercise training, nutritional counseling, education about COPD and how to manage it, energy-conserving techniques, breathing strategies, and psychological counseling and/or group support.

For more information about COPD, click [HERE](#).