

THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT COPD

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)?

- It is a lung disease that makes it hard to breathe.
- Most people with COPD have both emphysema and chronic bronchitis.
- Emphysema damages the walls between the lung's air sacs and causes the air sacs to lose elasticity. This leads to shortness of breath.
- Chronic bronchitis inflames the lung's airways and causes them to become clogged with mucus. This makes breathing hard, and causes a chronic cough with mucus.

Who gets COPD?

- It is most common in cigarette smokers.
- It can also occur in persons exposed to lung irritants like air pollution, chemical fumes, second-hand smoke, or dust.
- A rare genetic condition called α_1 -antitrypsin deficiency makes some people vulnerable to lung damage from lung irritants.
- It is usually diagnosed in middle-aged or older adults.

What are the symptoms?

- Coughing up large amounts of mucus.
- Wheezing.
- Shortness of breath.
- Chest tightness.
- Symptoms develop slowly and often worsen over time.
- When severe, symptoms may make routine activities, like walking, difficult.

How is it diagnosed?

- Your doctor will listen to your chest with a stethoscope and ask about your symptoms, medical history, and possible causes of COPD.



- The doctor may order a test called "spirometry." You blow into a machine called a spirometer that measures how well your lungs are functioning.
- Other tests may include a chest x-ray or CT scan, which can reveal signs of COPD, and an arterial blood gas test, which measures the level of oxygen in your blood.

How is COPD treated?

- Smoking cessation is the most effective treatment.
- Medications can improve breathing, including bronchodilators, corticosteroids, antibiotics, and theophylline.
- Supplemental oxygen therapy increases the level of oxygen in blood.
- Your doctor may enroll you in a pulmonary rehabilitation program, which teaches patients skills for living with COPD.
- In severe cases, a surgery called "lung-volume reduction" can improve breathing by removing damaged tissue from the lungs. Rarely, patients may receive lung transplants.

For More Information

www.lungusa.org/lung-disease/copd/
Information for patients on COPD, including information on lifestyle changes, management tools, and support groups, from the American Lung Association.

www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/tobacco/cessation
Information on quitting smoking, including how to get help, from the National Cancer Institute.

www.alpha-1foundation.org/publications/
Publications from the Alpha-1 Foundation, including education brochures titled "What Is Alpha-1 Antitrypsin Deficiency?" and "What Does It Mean To Be an Alpha-1 Carrier?"

ACP
AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS
INTERNAL MEDICINE | Doctors for Adults®