

LEARN MORE BREATHE BETTER®

A PROGRAM OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH



BREATHING BETTER WITH A COPD DIAGNOSIS

You have taken the important step of being aware of your symptoms, and seeing your doctor or healthcare 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 manage your 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](https://www.smokefree.gov) 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 healthcare provider on a regular basis. Bring a list of all the 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.

COPD IS SERIOUS, BUT **YOU'RE NOT ALONE.**

COPD is also known as emphysema or chronic bronchitis. It is a serious disease that causes partially blocked airways in the lungs and loss of lung tissue. It worsens over time, making it harder to breathe.

COPD is a leading cause of death and disability in the United States. Millions of people have been diagnosed with it and millions more 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.



National Heart, Lung,
and Blood Institute

4) FOLLOW TREATMENT ADVICE.

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

5) STAY UP TO DATE ON VACCINATIONS.

Flu can cause serious problems for people with COPD. So, do your best to avoid crowds during flu season and get a flu shot every year. Also, ask your provider about the vaccine for pneumonia and for COVID-19.

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.



Talking with your doctor is good for your breathing.

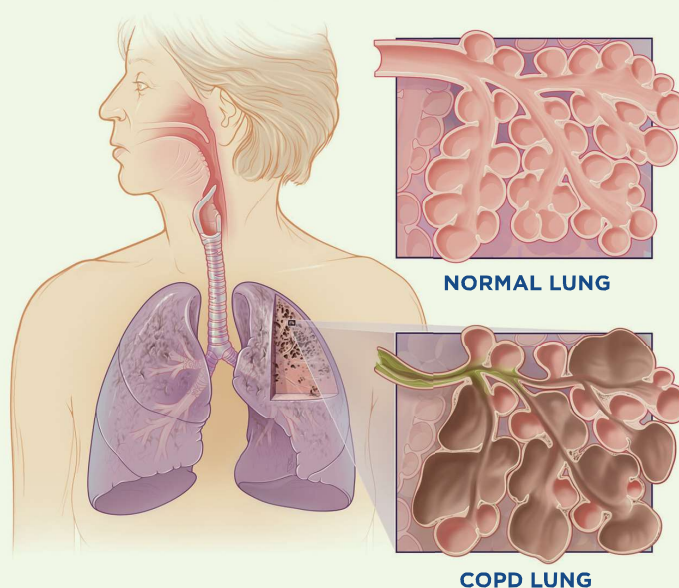
To get the best treatment for your COPD, it's important that you speak honestly with your healthcare provider at each visit. Let them know what's really going on with your breathing. Don't hesitate to ask questions about your disease, symptoms and treatment options.

Talk to your healthcare provider to learn breathing techniques. Be sure you understand how to use your medication and your inhaler.

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 patients also lose air sacs (lung tissue), so that few remain to function. 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

Spirometry is how COPD is diagnosed. 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 or 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. Check in with your doctor often to make sure you are using these medications correctly.

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. Pulmonary rehabilitation is right for most people with COPD, so ask your provider if it is right for you.

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 increase the amount of oxygen you breathe with the help of a machine 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.



**BREATHING BETTER
WITH A COPD DIAGNOSIS**

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR SYMPTOMS SUDDENLY WORSEN

Symptoms of COPD can suddenly get worse. 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 a sudden heart issue related to severe lung damage. The best thing to do is call your healthcare provider right away to seek help.

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 a place where it's easy to grab before you go to the doctor or healthcare provider. Things like:

- A list of all medications you are taking for COPD and other conditions.
- Contact information for your doctor or healthcare 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, visit [COPD.nih.gov](https://www.copd.nih.gov).



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 if you are using your medication.



**BREATHING BETTER
WITH A COPD DIAGNOSIS**