

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Breathing easier starts with smoking cessation

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is the name for a family of very common lung diseases that includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

COPD usually progresses gradually, causing limited airflow in and out of the lungs. It also adds to the work of the heart by reducing the amount of oxygen that goes to the blood. High blood pressure in blood vessels from the heart to the lungs makes it difficult for the heart to pump. Lung disease can also make the body produce too many red blood cells, which might make the blood thicker and harder to pump.¹

Smoking is the leading cause of COPD. Most people who have lung disease are smokers or former smokers. However, there are some exceptions. For example, long-term exposure to other lung irritants—such as air pollution, chemical fumes, or dust—also may contribute to COPD. A rare genetic condition called alpha-1 antitrypsin (AAT) deficiency can also cause the disease.²

Some of the symptoms of COPD are:

- Shortness of breath
- Chronic, productive cough (with mucus)
- A feeling of "tightness" in the chest
- Wheezing

There is no cure for COPD, but lifestyle changes can help reduce its effects. Smoking cessation is the most important key to healthy lungs. Limiting exposure to pollution or dust is also helpful.

A test called spirometry, where the patient blows into a measurement device, is the first step in diagnosing lung conditions, according to Gerald W. Staton, MD, a lung specialist and one of the expert consultants on the Best Doctors staff. "The most important step is smoking or environmental exposure cessation," he said.

Next steps

Your physician can diagnose COPD based on your signs and symptoms, your medical and family history, and test results. If you have an ongoing cough, you should let your doctor know how long you've had it, how much you cough, and how much mucus comes up when you cough. Also, let your doctor know whether you have a family history of COPD.

COPD can be difficult to diagnose because of the variety of factors that can cause it. But if you have been diagnosed with lung disease, your Best Doctors benefit can be an important tool in your overall approach to the problem. With comprehensive analysis and interpretation of your health care records, our medical experts can provide an objective, thorough second opinion that will guide your next steps and help you to breathe easier.

¹<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/8709-chronic-obstructive-pulmonary-disease-copd>

²<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/copd>

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