



CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE

PATIENT INFORMATION SHEET

What is COPD?

Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (COPD) refers to a number of lung disorders that are present over a long period of time and cause some narrowing or obstruction of the airways. **The most common form of COPD is a combination of chronic bronchitis and emphysema.** The most frequent warning signs of COPD are listed below. If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, discuss them with your doctor as soon as possible.

- **Chronic Cough** - Any cough that has lasted a month is chronic. This may be an important early symptom indicating something is wrong with your breathing system, regardless of your age.
- **Shortness of Breath** - Shortness of breath that continues after a brief rest following normal exercise, or comes after little or no exertion, is not normal. Labored or difficult breathing, the feeling that it is hard to draw air into your lungs or breathe it out, is also a warning sign.
- **Chronic Phlegm Production** - The lungs produce excess phlegm or sputum as a defense response to infection or irritants. Excess phlegm or mucus production lasting a month or longer could indicate an underlying problem.
- **Wheezing** - Noisy breathing or wheezing is a sign that something unusual is blocking the airways of your lungs or making the airways too narrow.
- **Coughing Up Blood (Hemoptysis)** - If you are coughing up blood, the blood may be coming from your lungs or upper respiratory tract. Whatever the source of the blood, it signals the onset of a health problem.
- **Frequent Chest Colds** - If you have more than two colds a year, or if they last more than two weeks, you may have an underlying disorder.

What causes COPD?

Chronic Bronchitis: Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of chronic bronchitis in the United States. Chronic bronchitis may occur in the non-smoker. Environmental pollution may contribute to the development of chronic bronchitis.

Emphysema: Cigarette smoking contributes to the destructive processes that end up as emphysema. It is believed that emphysema often is a late effect of chronic infection or irritation of the bronchial tubes.

The purpose of the lungs is to allow oxygen to enter the blood when air is breathed in, and waste gas (carbon dioxide) to be removed from the lungs by breathing out. COPD interferes with this process.

When infection or irritation continues or is repeated over a period of time, stretching and destruction of the walls of the lung's air spaces ensues. The lungs as a whole may become enlarged, and less efficient in exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide. (Enlarged lungs are what give emphysema its name - emphysema is a Greek word meaning "Inflation").



How is COPD treated?

The best treatment for COPD is prevention. Prevention means no smoking. Once COPD is established, smoking cessation does not cure the disease. The cough associated with COPD (chronic bronchitis) usually diminishes within weeks of smoking cessation and may disappear entirely within three months. Obstruction to air flow caused by swelling of the walls of the bronchi persists, although medications to dilate the bronchi (bronchodilators) may diminish the breathlessness. The important point to remember is that patients with COPD who continue to smoke, continue to deteriorate relatively rapidly. Smoking cessation will stop this rapid deterioration and there may actually be a slight improvement in the ability to lead a normal life.

In addition to encouraging smoking cessation, many physicians prescribe the following for patients diagnosed with COPD:

- **Antibiotics** for acute chest infections to prevent pneumonia.
- **Vaccinations** against influenza annually and a vaccination against bacterial pneumococcal pneumonia (revaccination for pneumonia depends on age and health status).
- Instructions to **avoid excessive dust** and fumes.
- **Regular exercise**. Exercise does not improve the ability of the lungs to take up oxygen, but the effects of physical fitness on the cardiovascular system will compensate somewhat for the impaired lung function. The result of physical fitness in the patient suffering from COPD is a lessening in breathlessness on exercise.
- **Medications** to help breathing such as bronchodilators, anti-inflammatories, or inhaled steroids.

COPD is generally a preventable disease and primarily occurs in smokers. It is never too late to stop smoking. The patient with COPD can be treated with better results in the early stages of the disease.

What can I do?

You, your family members and friends need to protect your lungs. Here's how:

- **Don't smoke**. Quitting smoking is the best protection you can give your lungs and reduces your risk of lung disease.
- **Be honest**. Understand that chronic cough, shortness of breath and other lung symptoms are not normal.
- **Take action**. Bring any lung disease symptom to your doctor's attention early. Then follow the doctor's advice.
- **Avoid lung hazards**. Secondhand cigarette smoke, air pollution, and lung hazards at work can cause some lung diseases.
- **Think about prevention**. Lung diseases like influenza (flu) and pneumococcal pneumonia can be prevented with vaccination. Get immunized if you are in a high-risk group, which includes people over 65 or anyone with a chronic health problem such as heart disease, lung disease and diabetes. Wash hands frequently, especially in public places.

Remember - early detection of lung disease is the key to prompt and successful treatment.

Reference: *The American Lung Association*: www.lungusa.org

The Canadian Lung Association: "Living with Lung Disease" www.lung.ca/diseases

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