



Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema, is a long-term lung disease that makes it hard to breathe. The disease affects millions of Americans and is the third leading cause of disease-related death in the U.S. COPD is often preventable and treatable. The American Lung Association (www.lung.org) is committed to supporting those affected by COPD and offers a variety of resources and information about the disease.

What Is COPD?

COPD is a chronic lung disease that gets worse over time. It's sometimes called emphysema or chronic bronchitis. More than 15.3 million people in the U.S. suffer from COPD. It causes serious long-term disability and early death. There's no cure, but COPD can be prevented and treated.

COPD Symptoms, Causes and Risk Factors

Early detection of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is key to successful treatment. If you have any of the symptoms or exposures to risk factors mentioned in the sections below, talk to your doctor about them.

Symptoms

Many people don't recognize the symptoms of COPD until later stages of the disease. Sometimes people think they are short of breath or less able to go about their normal activities because they are "just getting older." Shortness of breath can be an important symptom of lung disease.

- Chronic cough
- Shortness of breath while doing everyday activities (dyspnea)
- Frequent respiratory infections
- Blueness of the lips or fingernail beds (cyanosis)
- Fatigue
- Producing a lot of mucus (also called phlegm or sputum)
- Wheezing

Remember: Don't wait for symptoms to become severe because valuable treatment time could be lost.

Causes

About 85 to 90 percent of all COPD cases are caused by cigarette smoking. When a cigarette burns, it creates more than 7,000 chemicals, many of which are harmful. The toxins in cigarette smoke weaken your lungs' defense against infections, narrow air passages, cause swelling in air tubes and destroy air sacs (all contributing factors for COPD). What you breathe every day at work, home and outside can play a role in developing COPD. Long-term exposure to air pollution, secondhand smoke and dust, fumes and chemicals (which are often work-related) can cause COPD.

COPD Risk Factors

Smoking is the biggest risk factor for COPD. Female smokers are nearly 13 times as likely to die from COPD as women who have never smoked; male smokers are nearly 12 times as likely to die from COPD as men who have never smoked.

Other risk factors for COPD include:

- Exposure to air pollution
- Breathing secondhand smoke
- Working with chemicals, dust and fumes
- A genetic condition called Alpha-1 deficiency
- A history of childhood respiratory infection

5 Steps to Reduce Your Risk for COPD

- If you are a smoker, STOP SMOKING. Quitting smoking is the single most important thing a smoker can do to live a longer and healthier life.
- If you don't smoke, don't start.
- Avoid exposure to secondhand smoke. Make your home smoke free.
- Be aware of other dangers. Take care to protect yourself against chemicals, dust and fumes in your home and at work.