

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a type of chronic (long-term) lung disease that includes emphysema (em-fuh-ZEE-muh) and, often, chronic bronchitis (brong-KEYE-tuhss). A person with COPD has airways that don't allow as much air into the lungs as healthy airways and lungs. The airways may also be inflamed, which causes cells that make mucus to grow more than normal. This can lead to chronic coughing to get rid of the extra mucus. COPD can make it difficult to breathe.

Q: What are symptoms of COPD?

A: At first, COPD may cause no symptoms. Or, you may have mild symptoms that you think are some other illness. As COPD gets worse, symptoms usually become more serious. Common symptoms include:

- An ongoing cough or coughing up lots of mucus or phlegm (often called “smoker’s cough”)
- Shortness of breath, especially with moderate physical activity
- Wheezing (a whistling or squeaky sound when you breathe)
- Chest tightness

If you have symptoms of COPD, talk to your doctor about tests for COPD.

Q: Who gets COPD?

A: COPD usually happens to people who are 40 and older. More women than men have COPD. Women also develop COPD at a younger age (often between 45 and 64). Researchers are not exactly sure why COPD affects women more. It may be because:

- The number of women who smoke is now almost as high as the number of men who smoke.

Experts think that cigarette smoke may be more damaging to women’s lungs. Women have smaller lungs and bronchial tubes than men, so the same amount of inhaled smoke may cause more damage.

- The hormone estrogen may make women’s lungs more sensitive to tobacco smoke exposure.
- Some studies show that breathing in pollutants such as dust may affect women more than men. Women usually have smaller lungs and bronchial tubes, so the same amount of inhaled pollutants may cause more damage.

Q: How does COPD affect women’s health?

A: Women living with COPD often have other health problems, including:

- **Asthma**, another type of lung disease
- **Osteoporosis**. This condition is more common in women, but more than half of people with COPD have osteoporosis. It may be related to steroid medicines that are sometimes used to treat COPD.
- **Anxiety and depression**. Anxiety and depression also affect many women with COPD. In one study, women with COPD had higher levels of anxiety and depression compared with both men with COPD and women who did not have COPD.
- **Heart disease**. Researchers think that COPD may cause inflammation throughout the body, including the blood vessels. This inflammation can make blood vessels stiff and increase the risk for plaque buildup. Over time, this can lead to heart disease.

Q: How is COPD treated?

A: Quitting smoking is the only proven way to slow down COPD. Get free help to quit smoking at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669) or at women.smokefree.gov. Medicines and other treatments may relieve some of your symptoms for some time. But treatments will not fix any lung damage you already have.

Your doctor will work with you on a treatment plan that may include:

- **Steps to take** to prevent further damage to your lungs, including stopping smoking, avoiding dust and chemical fumes, and getting flu and pneumonia shots.
- **Medicines** to open airways and lessen inflammation. Common medicines for COPD include inhaled corticosteroids, other anti-inflammatory drugs, and bronchodilators. Since people with COPD are at risk for developing lung infections, you may also need antibiotics.
- **Pulmonary rehabilitation** to help you cope physically and mentally with COPD. Rehabilitation can include exercise, training to manage the disease, and counseling about nutrition and exercise.

- **Oxygen therapy** through a tube or mask, if you have severe COPD

- **Surgery** to remove the damaged parts of your lungs or to replace your lungs (lung transplant)

Q: How can I prevent COPD?

A: You can help prevent COPD with the following steps:

- **Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke.** Smoking at a young age increases the chance of having COPD later in life because it can damage growing lungs. If you smoke now, quit. If you live, drive, or work with people who smoke, ask them to smoke outside and only when they are away from you.
- **Protect yourself from dust and chemical fumes.** Read labels and carefully follow instructions on any chemical product you use (like cleaning products). If possible, do not use products that cause eye, nose, or throat irritation. If you have to use them, use them as little as possible and only in a well-ventilated area. Wear protective equipment like a ventilator mask.
- **Talk to your doctor** if you have a cough that won't go away, trouble breathing, or pain or discomfort in your chest.

For more information...

For more information about COPD, call the OWH Helpline at 1-800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), HHS

1-800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI), NIH, HHS

301-592-8573 • www.nhlbi.nih.gov

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS

1-866-284-4107 • www.niaid.nih.gov

American Lung Association

1-800-586-4872 • www.lungusa.org

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