

Patient information from BMJ

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COPD: what is it?

COPD stands for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. It means that lung damage is stopping your lungs working as well as they used to. There is no cure but there are treatments that can help stop it getting worse.

You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are right for you.

What is COPD?

If you have COPD the airways in your lungs have been damaged over many years. This damage is usually caused by smoking. But other things can cause COPD, including breathing in other poisonous chemicals (possibly through long exposure to severe air pollution), and some inherited genetic conditions.

There are two main types of lung damage that cause COPD. One is **bronchitis**, where your airways become narrow and inflamed, making it harder to breathe. Your lungs may also make too much mucus, which causes coughing.

The bronchitis caused by COPD lasts for a long time. It's not the same as having bronchitis that's caused by an infection.

The other type of damage is **emphysema**. This causes parts of your lungs to become less elastic (stretchy) so that they don't squeeze air out properly. When you breathe out, some old air gets trapped in your lungs. So you don't get the full amount of fresh air when you breathe in.

Having COPD can mean you have either bronchitis or emphysema, or both at the same time.

What are the symptoms?

The main symptoms of COPD are coughing and shortness of breath. Your cough may last a long time. And you may get short of breath doing everyday things, like going for a walk or doing housework.

You may sometimes get attacks, when your COPD symptoms suddenly get a lot worse than usual. Doctors call these **exacerbations**. If you have trouble breathing you should always see a doctor or go to hospital right away.

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If you smoke you may have got used to coughing and think it's normal. But coughing may be a sign of lung damage, so it's important to get it checked by a doctor.

What will happen to me?

It's hard to say what will happen to you as an individual. Treatments can't repair the damage to your lungs, but they can help stop it getting worse.

Many people live with COPD for many years without it getting any worse. But others get worse more quickly, and some people die within a few years of being diagnosed.

Stopping smoking helps slow the damage caused by COPD. You are also more likely to do better if you don't have other serious illnesses, if lung problems don't run in your family, and if your symptoms are not severe when you first get treatment.

Trying to keep to a healthy weight can help with your symptoms. For example, people who are underweight tend to do worse, so eating regularly and keeping your strength up is important. On the other hand, if you are overweight, losing some weight could help you breathe more easily.

It's not surprising that COPD can lead to depression in some people. Talk to your doctor if you feel depressed. There are treatments that can help.

Your doctor should see you at least every six months depending on how severe your symptoms are. These regular check-ups help your doctor to monitor whether your medication is as effective as it should be.

Where to get more help or support

COPD is a serious condition, and you may find that getting help and support makes your life easier. Various support groups and charities offer help and advice to people with COPD. For example, in the UK, the British Lung Foundation (blf.org.uk) runs Breathe Easy patient groups for people with breathing problems, as well as a helpline.

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