

# COPD: Are You at Risk?

## DID YOU KNOW?

COPD is the 4<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death and the 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of disability in the United States. The disease kills more than 120,000 Americans each year—that's 1 death every 4 minutes. The number of people with COPD is increasing. More than 12 million people are diagnosed with COPD and an additional 12 million likely have the disease and don't even know it.

## WHAT IS COPD?

COPD is a serious lung disease that over time makes it hard to breathe. You may have heard COPD called other names, like emphysema or chronic bronchitis.

In people who have COPD, the airways—tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs—are partly blocked, which makes it hard to get air in and out.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

Many people with COPD avoid activities that they used to enjoy because they become short of breath more easily.

Symptoms of COPD include:

- Constant coughing, sometimes called “smoker’s cough”
- Shortness of breath while doing activities you used to be able to do
- Excess sputum production
- Feeling like you can’t breathe
- Not being able to take a deep breath
- Wheezing

When COPD is severe, shortness of breath and other symptoms can get in the way of doing even the most basic tasks, such as doing light housework, taking a walk, and even bathing and getting dressed.

COPD develops slowly, and can worsen over time, so be sure to report any symptoms you might have to your doctor as soon as possible, no matter how mild they may seem.

## ARE YOU AT RISK?

Most people who are at risk for getting COPD have never even heard of it and, in many cases, don't even realize that the condition has a name. Some of the things that put you at risk for COPD include:

### Smoking

COPD most often occurs in people age 40 and over with a history of smoking (either current or former smokers), although as many as 1 out of 6 people with COPD never smoked. Smoking is the most common cause of COPD—it accounts for as many as 9 out of 10 COPD-related deaths.

### Environmental Exposure

COPD can also occur in people who have had long-term exposure to things that can irritate your lungs, like certain chemicals, dust, or fumes in the workplace. Heavy or long-term exposure to secondhand smoke or other air pollutants may also contribute to COPD.

### Genetic Factors

In some people, COPD is caused by a genetic condition known as alpha-1 antitrypsin, or AAT, deficiency. While very few people know they have AAT deficiency, it is estimated that as many as 100,000 Americans have it. People with AAT deficiency can get COPD even if they have never smoked or had long-term exposure to harmful pollutants.



## GETTING TESTED

Everyone at risk for COPD who has a cough, sputum production or shortness of breath, should be tested for the disease. The test for COPD is called spirometry.

### Spirometry

Spirometry can detect COPD before symptoms become severe. It is a simple, noninvasive breathing test that measures the amount of air a person can blow out of the lungs (volume) and how fast he or she can blow it out (flow). Based on this test, your doctor can tell if you have COPD, and if so, how severe it is. The spirometry reading can help your doctor determine the best course of treatment.

## HOW SPIROMETRY WORKS

Spirometry is one of the best and most common lung function tests. The test is done with a spirometer, a machine that measures how well your lungs function, records the results, and displays them on a graph for your doctor. You will be asked to take a deep breath, then blow out as hard and as fast as you can using a mouthpiece connected to the machine with tubing. The

spirometer then measures the total amount of air exhaled, called the forced vital capacity or FVC, and how much you exhaled in the first second, called the forced expiratory volume in 1 second or FEV<sub>1</sub>. Your doctor will use the results to assess how well your lungs are working and whether or not you have COPD.



## TAKING ACTION

There are many things people at risk for COPD can do:

### Quit Smoking

If you smoke, the best thing you can do to prevent more damage to your lungs is to quit. To help you quit, there are many online resources and several new aids available from your doctor. Visit [www.smokefree.gov](http://www.smokefree.gov); [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org); or call 1-800-QUIT NOW for more information.

## Avoid Exposure to Pollutants

Try to stay away from other things that could irritate your lungs, like dust and strong fumes. Stay indoors when the outside air quality is poor. You should also stay away from places where there might be cigarette smoke.

## Visit Your Doctor on a Regular Basis

See your doctor regularly even if you are feeling fine. Make a list of your breathing symptoms and think about any activities that you can no longer do because of shortness of breath. Be sure to bring a list of all the medicines you are taking to each doctor's visit.

Do your best to avoid crowds during flu season. It is also a good idea to get a flu shot every year, since the flu can cause serious problems for people with COPD. You should also ask your doctor about the pneumonia vaccine.

## LEARN MORE BREATHE BETTER

If you think you might be at risk for COPD, get a simple breathing test. Talk with your doctor about treatment options. You can take steps to make breathing easier and live a longer and more active life.

For more information, visit [www.LearnAboutCOPD.org](http://www.LearnAboutCOPD.org).

Or contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at [www.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov).

**COPD** Learn More  
Breathe Better



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
National Institutes of Health



National Heart  
Lung and Blood Institute

NIH Publication No. 06-5840  
September 2006