

## Learning the Basics of COPD

What does Johnny Carson, Dean Martin, and Amy Winehouse all have in common? The answer might surprise you. These three people decided to pick up a cigarette one day, and unfortunately fall ill with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease – COPD.

COPD is a disease that causes blockages in the airways that make breathing extremely difficult. The National Institute of Health claims that COPD affects 16 million people across the country, making it one of the biggest health issues that the older population faces.

COPD works as an umbrella term and includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis. So – what are the symptoms of these progressive lung diseases? Two of the main symptoms are frequent coughing, often accompanied by wheezing. This cough tends to release excess phlegm and mucus. People with COPD may also notice shortness of breath and have difficulty breathing deeply. Because symptoms gradually develop overtime, some people don't even know they are ill.

Nearly **8 out of 10 COPD-related deaths are caused by smoking**. Although cigarettes are a leading cause of COPD, other kinds of tobacco smoke like cigars and pipes can cause the disease as well. Long-term exposure to lung irritants like air pollution, chemical fumes, dust, and even second-hand smoke, may also contribute to the development of the disease. Sometimes, people who have asthma can develop COPD in their later years.

Currently, there is no cure for COPD, but there are multiple ways to slow the progression of the disease. There are some lifestyle changes you can make that may ease your symptoms;

- First off, one of the best ways to improve COPD is to fully **quit smoking**. There are programs, products, support groups, and other kinds of help waiting for your call.
- **Avoid lung irritants**, like second hand smoke, dusts, and fumes in your daily life.
- If your doctor says it's physically safe, **physical activity** can improve your health and possibly even strengthen muscles that assist in breathing. In severe cases of COPD, physical activity may not be safe, so make sure you talk to your doctor before trying physical activity.
- Some medicines, like short-acting or long-acting **bronchodilators** can relax the muscles surrounding your airways which can make breathing easier.

- Along with bronchodilators, your doctor might suggest trying **inhaled glucocorticosteroids** which can help reduce inflammation in the airways.
- Like medicines, getting **vaccines** for the flu and pneumonia are a good idea.

Unfortunately, COPD is likely to progress in severity over time. The flu, a cold, or lung infections can drastically worsen symptoms. If you have or develop COPD, it's important to keep your doctor in the loop. Your doctor will be able to catch illnesses as quickly as possible and help you breathe effectively again. Some things your doctor might suggest could be doing activities slowly, keeping items you use frequently close by, avoiding stairs, and wearing loose clothes.

Sometimes COPD can affect your emotional health. Living with COPD can cause anxiety, depression, and stress. Your doctor might have some treatments for your mental health, too, so don't be afraid to ask for help.

COPD is the **third leading cause of death** in the United States, and rates may rise as the population increases. But, if you avoid lung irritants and communicate effectively with your doctor, you can surpass life expectancies and make a difference in your health.

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