
How do you know if you have COPD?

When it comes to chronic illnesses like COPD, only your healthcare provider can make an accurate diagnosis. However, there are certain symptoms that are common to COPD. Many people with COPD avoid activities that they used to enjoy because they become short of breath more easily. If you are experiencing any of the following symptoms, you should make an appointment to see your healthcare provider because early diagnosis and treatment is important.

Common symptoms of COPD include^{1,2}

- Shortness of breath that gets in the way of doing everyday things, like taking a walk, going shopping, getting dressed, or doing light housework
- Constant coughing, sometimes called "smoker's cough"
- Excess sputum production (sputum is a mixture of saliva and mucus coughed up from your lungs)
- Not being able to take a deep breath
- Wheezing and tightness in your chest when you breathe in and out

Your healthcare provider will suspect COPD based on your symptoms and your history of exposure to certain risk factors. Be sure to offer an accurate accounting of both. The diagnosis of COPD is then confirmed with a simple breathing test using a spirometer. This is a device that determines the health of your lungs by measuring how much air your lungs can hold and how easily you can breathe it out.^{1,2}

Are you at risk for COPD?

Most people who are at risk for getting COPD don't even realize that this condition exists. Or you may have heard it called by other names, like chronic bronchitis or emphysema. Some of the things that can put you at risk for getting COPD include the following:

Smoking - COPD occurs most often in people who are age 40 and over with a history of smoking (either current or former smokers). Approximately 80% to 90% of all COPD is caused by cigarette smoking.^{1,3}

Environmental exposure - COPD can also occur in people who have had long-term exposure to things that can irritate the lungs, like certain chemicals, dust, or fumes in the workplace. Heavy or long-term exposure to secondhand smoke or other air pollutants may also put you at risk for getting COPD.^{1,3}

Genetic factors - A small number of people have been found to lack a certain blood protein (alpha-1 antitrypsin, or AAT), which has been linked to COPD. Not everyone, however, who lacks this blood protein develops COPD.^{1,3}

In addition to smoking, environmental exposure and genetic factors, a history of severe childhood respiratory infections are often associated with breathing difficulties later in life, including COPD.^{1,3}

Quit Smoking

When it comes to managing your COPD, the sooner you quit smoking, the better. The decision to quit smoking may give you an edge in your fight against COPD. In fact, quitting smoking now may help improve your lung function.⁴ However, it's important to remember that the benefits of quitting can be quickly lost if you choose to resume the habit.⁴

Although smoking is one of the most difficult addictions to overcome, millions of people have successfully used smoking cessation programs to help them quit permanently. Talk frankly with your healthcare provider about stop-smoking programs, quit strategies, and medications that are available to help you kick the smoking habit.