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COPD: The More You Know, The Better for You and Your Loved Ones

People who have COPD:

- Become short of breath while doing everyday activities they used to do with ease.
- Produce excess sputum.
- Cough frequently, or constantly. Some call this a "smoker's cough."
- Wheeze.
- Feel like they can't breathe.
- Are unable to take a deep breath.

As time goes by, these symptoms get gradually worse.

COPD develops slowly, and can worsen over time. Many people with COPD avoid activities they used to enjoy because they become short of breath so easily. When COPD becomes severe, it can get in the way of doing even the most basic tasks, such as light housekeeping, taking a walk, bathing and getting dressed.

COPD is serious, yet many don't know they have it.

As we age, it's easy to think that some of the symptoms of COPD are just part of "getting older." But they're not. If you think you have even mild symptoms, tell your doctor or health care provider as soon as possible.

COPD is the third leading cause of death in the United States, claiming more than 120,000 American lives each year. More than 12 million have been diagnosed, but another 12 million are likely to have COPD and don't know it.

The lung disease with many different names.

COPD is a serious lung disease that over time makes it hard to breathe. Its official name is Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, but COPD has other names, like emphysema or chronic bronchitis.

In those who have COPD, the airways, or tubes that carry air in and out of the lungs are partly blocked, making it difficult to breathe.

Could you be at risk for COPD? Yes, if you:

Used to smoke or still do.

COPD most often occurs in people age 40 and over who are current or former smokers. Smoking is the most common cause of COPD, accounting for as many as nine out of ten COPD-related deaths. However, as many as one out of six people who have COPD never smoked.

Have long-term exposure to lung irritants.

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.

Have a genetic condition called AAT deficiency.

As many as 100,000 Americans have alpha-1 antitrypsin or AAT deficiency. They can get COPD even if they have never smoked or had long-term exposure to harmful pollutants.

Know for sure. Get a spirometry test.

Spirometry is a common, non-invasive lung function test that can detect COPD before symptoms become severe.

It measures the amount of air you can blow out of your lungs (volume) and how fast you can blow it out (flow). That way, your doctor or health care provider can tell if you have COPD, and how severe it is. The spirometry reading can help determine the best course of treatment.

Five things everyone at risk should do:

1) Quit smoking.

There are many online resources and several new aids available from your health

care provider. Visit smokefree.gov; or call **1-800-QUIT NOW**.

2) Avoid exposure to pollutants.

Stay away from things that could irritate your lungs, like dust, strong fumes and cigarette smoke.

3) Visit your doctor or health care provider regularly.

Make a list of your breathing symptoms, and think about any activities that you can no longer do because of shortness of breath.

4) Protect yourself from the flu.

Do your best to avoid crowds during flu season. It is also a good idea to get a flu shot every year.

5) Learn more so you can breathe better.

For more information and free, downloadable materials, visit: [COPD.nhlbi.nih.gov](https://copd.nhlbi.nih.gov) or contact the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute at: www.nhlbi.nih.gov.

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