

# WHEN COPD\* SYMPTOMS GET WORSE

\*Includes chronic bronchitis,  
emphysema, or both.



# WHEN COPD SYMPTOMS GET WORSE

COPD\* is a lung disease. It includes chronic bronchitis (brank-eye-tis), emphysema (em-fuh-zee-muh), or both. COPD can make it hard to breathe. And it can slowly get worse over time. The good news is there are a lot of things you can do that may help improve your symptoms.

Sometimes, you may have flare-ups. Some of your symptoms may get worse for awhile. You may also get other illnesses. You need to know how to tell when these things happen. And you need to know what you should do. Then you can get the treatment you need when you need it.

This booklet will give you information about things that may make your symptoms get worse. It will give you tips on how you can avoid them. You'll find out what you can do to help keep from getting some infections and illnesses, too. And you can learn how to make an action plan with your healthcare practitioner that may prevent flare-ups. Your action plan may also help you when your COPD symptoms get worse.

\*Chronic (kron-ick) obstructive (ob-struck-tiv) pulmonary (pull-muh-nair-ee) disease.

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# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO TREAT COPD?

COPD is a life-long disease. It won't go away, but it can be treated. You should take an active part in your treatment. You can make healthy lifestyle choices, like not smoking and eating well. You should take your medicines just as your healthcare practitioner tells you.

Doing all you can to treat COPD may help you

- Breathe easier
- Feel stronger and be more active
- Enjoy life more



# WHAT IS A COPD FLARE-UP?

A flare-up is when some or all of your symptoms suddenly get worse. These can be your cough, shortness of breath, and/or excess production of mucus.

## What Should You Do About It?

If you have a flare-up

- Talk to your healthcare practitioner
- Ask any questions you may have about how much medicine to take, or if you need new medicines
- You may need to take more of your rescue medicine
- If your symptoms are very bad, call 9-1-1 or an ambulance. Or go to the emergency room



## And Also Get Medical Help If You

- Are getting a bad cold or chest infection
- Have a cough with yellow or green mucus (with or without fever or chills)
- Are using more puffs of medicine from your rescue inhaler
- Feel your medicine doesn't seem to be working as well
- Are having a very hard time breathing
- Are coughing up blood
- Have sudden shortness of breath with or without chest pain

# WHAT CAUSES FLARE-UPS?

Sometimes, even when you stay on your action plan, your symptoms may flare up. This often happens suddenly. Sometimes, the cause of a flare-up is not known. It may be caused by an infection or other things. Each person has different causes of flare-ups.

## Learning Your Personal COPD Irritants

Look over this list of common irritants. Have any of these made your symptoms worse?

- Smoking, or being around smoke
- Infections, like colds or the flu
- Strong fumes, like car exhausts and perfume
- Air pollution and smog
- Weather changes
- Very cold or very humid air
- Stress and anxiety (nervousness)





## What Are Your Irritants?

Now you know what can cause symptoms to get worse. But every person is different. What causes a flare-up in one person may not cause a flare-up in another. So you need to know what your irritants are.

Keep a diary of your flare-ups. Share it with your healthcare practitioner. Think about the last few times when your breathing or other symptoms got worse. Then answer these questions:

Where were you when your symptoms got worse?

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What were you doing when your symptoms got worse?

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What were the symptoms that got worse?  
Did you have any new symptoms?

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What did you do to reduce your symptoms?

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Is there a way you can avoid this irritant in the future?

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## Plan Ahead!

Make sure you'll be able to act fast in an emergency. Have a written action plan. Put these things in one place that will be easy for you to get to:

- Phone numbers for your healthcare practitioner, hospital, and people who can get you there
- Directions to the hospital and healthcare practitioner's office
- A list of all the medicines you take— and how much you take of each one





## How Can You Avoid Risks?

Once you know what things cause your symptoms to get worse, you can try to avoid them. To help reduce flare-ups and keep your COPD under control

- Do not smoke. Stay away from places where people are smoking. Avoid smoke from cooking
- Try not to spend time with people who have a cold, sore throat, flu, or pneumonia. Ask your healthcare practitioner about getting flu and pneumonia shots
- If you can, try not to sit in traffic or go outdoors when there are air pollution alerts
- In cold weather, cover your nose and mouth with a scarf. Breathe through your nose
- In hot, humid weather or days with smog, stay indoors. Stay in an air-conditioned room
- Don't breathe in fumes from perfume, paint, or cleaning products
- Learn ways to relax and manage stress. You can try deep breathing or yoga

## When You Can't Avoid Risks . . .

No matter how much you try, there may be times when you will be near your risks. If your COPD symptoms get worse:

- Try to get away from the irritant. For example, if you are caught in a traffic jam, turn off to a side street as soon as you can
- Take your rescue medicine, just as your healthcare practitioner told you
- Do this exercise to help reduce shortness of breath:
  1. Sit in a chair with your head supported.
  2. Breathe in slowly through your nose. Breathe in until your lungs fill up.
  3. Don't hold your breath. Purse (pucker) your lips as if you were going to whistle and breathe out slowly.
  4. Take twice as long to breathe out as you did to breathe in.
  5. Repeat.



# COPD SYMPTOMS AND INFECTIONS

When you have COPD, your lungs do not work as well as they should. You can't fight infection as well. You are more likely to get other illnesses. You are more likely to get respiratory system\* infections, too.

These infections can make your COPD symptoms worse. They can harm your overall health. This is especially true in older adults. They can cause you to have

- More shortness of breath
- Chest tightness
- More coughing and/or mucus than usual
- Yellow, green, or brown mucus, or mucus that is thicker or stickier than usual
- Fever

Call your healthcare practitioner if you have these symptoms. You may need to have your medicine changed. You may need to get an antibiotic (an-tie-by-ah-tik) medicine that helps to fight infections caused by bacteria.

\*Respiratory (ress-per-uh-tor-ee) system.  
The system in your body that is responsible for breathing. It includes your lungs, nose, mouth, throat, windpipe, and other airways.

# COPD, A COLD, THE FLU, AND PNEUMONIA

A cold, the flu, and pneumonia (noo-moan-ya) are respiratory infections. People with COPD can get very sick if they have pneumonia. This is a serious disease, especially when you have COPD. That's because the lungs are already weak. When you have pneumonia

- The lungs fill with mucus and other fluids
- That makes it hard for oxygen to reach the blood
- There is not enough oxygen in the blood. So the body can't work the way it should

Do what you can to keep from getting it.



# TAKE STEPS TO PREVENT GETTING THE FLU AND PNEUMONIA



Talk to your healthcare practitioner about:

## Getting a flu shot every fall.

- Try to get the flu shot yearly in October or November. That's before flu season starts
- Ask your healthcare practitioner where you should get it
- You can also visit the American Lung Association online at [www.flucliniclocator.org](http://www.flucliniclocator.org) to find a flu shot clinic near where you live
- The people you live with should get a flu shot, too. Then they won't increase your chance of getting the flu
- Do your best to avoid crowds during flu season
- Wash your hands often and try not to touch your face a lot

## Getting a pneumonia shot, too.

Check with your healthcare practitioner about if and when you should get it. Sometimes, you may need to get a second shot, too.



# QUESTIONS TO DISCUSS WITH YOUR HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONER



These are things you can discuss on your next visit to your healthcare practitioner. You can add more questions you may have. Bring this sheet and your action plan with you. Write down the answers you get on the lines below each question.

What signs of a flare-up should I watch out for?

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What should I do if I have a flare-up?

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Should I make any changes in the medicines I take?

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What else can I do to reduce my COPD symptoms?

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When and where should I get a flu shot?

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Should I get a pneumonia shot?

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