Talking to Your Doctor About COPD

How do I know if my COPD is getting worse?

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a disease that affects your lungs, which makes it difficult to breathe. Over time, the ways that COPD affects you can get worse. If that happens, your doctor may need to adjust your treatment.

✔ Keep track of how your COPD affects you
✔ Talk to your doctor about any changes

Cough

People with COPD may cough most days or their cough never really goes away. It is common for this coughing to produce a thick sputum (a mixture of saliva and mucus).

Most people with COPD used to smoke, so they often think this is just a "smoker's cough." Cough is not normal. It is important to tell your doctor about any cough that you have.

Difficulty Breathing

People with COPD can become short of breath when they hurry or walk up a hill or a flight of stairs. You may feel as though you are struggling to catch your breath.

Struggling to breathe can be very unpleasant – even frightening. So people who have COPD often cut back on their usual activities, such as shopping, gardening, or playing with their grandchildren. Eventually, they may give up those activities.

Tiredness

When you’re not breathing properly, you also get tired very easily. You might find yourself feeling fatigued much of the time. This tiredness can also lead people with COPD to stop doing their usual activities.

People with COPD can also get worse (called an exacerbation) and require more immediate treatment to prevent hospitalization. Some signs that your COPD is getting worse include:

✔ You are coughing more than usual
✔ You are struggling more than usual to catch your breath
✔ You cough brings up more sputum than usual or it is discolored (yellow, green, or brown)
✔ You feel breathless more quickly than you did before
✔ It takes you longer to do things than it did before, because you have to go more slowly or take more rests
✔ You are wheezing (high-pitched whistling sound from the lungs) more than usual
✔ You get tired more than before

If you notice any of these changes, let your doctor know.
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Does it really make a difference if I smoke?
If you smoke cigarettes, the most important thing you can do is stop smoking. Smoking (anything) is the main contributor to COPD and continuing to smoke makes the disease get worse faster. When you quit smoking, you will start to feel an improvement in your cough, sputum, and breathing.

Of course, it isn’t easy to quit smoking. If you don’t think that you can do it by yourself, there are a number of ways to help make it easier to quit. Ask your doctor or healthcare professional.

Do medications for COPD work?
There are many medications available to treat your COPD, and starting treatment as early as possible is important. These medications can help control your symptoms, improve how you feel, and make it easier for you to do the things that you normally do. You may find that you can go back to doing things that you had given up because you were too tired or out of breath to enjoy.

Most medications for COPD are taken using an inhaler. If you’re not using an inhaler correctly, the medication won’t work as expected. So if you’re not sure whether you’re using an inhaler correctly, speak to one of your healthcare professionals. Bring your inhalers with you to your medical appointments.

If you’ve been using COPD medications for more than a month and you don’t think they’re helping, let your doctor know. A different medication or combination of medications may work better for you.

Is there anything else that I can do about my COPD?
In addition to not smoking, there are other ways that can improve your symptoms.

First, make sure that you talk to your doctor about vaccinations, such as for influenza and pneumonia. These vaccines are especially important for people who have COPD.

Ask about pulmonary rehabilitation programs available in your area. These programs usually last 6 weeks or more and have been proven to help people with COPD. You will learn more about how your lungs work and what you can do to improve your breathing. Exercises are designed to suit your personal needs and taught so you can do them at home. Most people who participate in a pulmonary rehabilitation program find that they can:

✔ Breathe better
✔ Be more active

What else I should tell my doctor?
A few other things may be a sign that your COPD is getting worse. Keep this list handy. Tell your doctor if:

✔ You think that you might have a chest infection
✔ You had to see a different healthcare provider for any reason
✔ You go to an urgent care or emergency care clinic because of difficulty breathing
✔ You were admitted to the hospital
✔ You need your inhaler more than before
✔ Your colds seem to last longer than they used to
✔ You have had more than 1 cold in less than a year