

What Is Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)?

Chronic obstructive lung disease (COPD) describes a group of lung conditions (diseases) that make it difficult to empty the air out of the lungs. This difficulty can lead to shortness of breath (also called breathlessness) or the feeling of being tired. COPD is a word that can be used to describe a person with chronic bronchitis, emphysema or a combination of these. COPD is a different condition from asthma, but it can be difficult to distinguish between COPD and chronic asthma.

Two people may have COPD, but one may have more symptoms of chronic bronchitis while another may have more symptoms of emphysema. It is helpful to understand the difference between the two conditions, as COPD means a person may have some chronic bronchitis as well as emphysema.

How do I know I have COPD?

Cough, sputum production or shortness of breath that will not go away are all common signs of COPD. These signs and a history of smoking will usually indicate the need for a test called spirometry, which measures if you have airway obstruction or not.

How does my healthcare provider know I have COPD?

Your healthcare provider will decide if you have COPD based on both your reports of symptoms and test results. The single most important test to determine if you have COPD is spirometry. The most important things you can do to help your healthcare provider in determining if you have COPD is to: 1) be honest about your smoking history; 2) share your exposures to pollutants and chemicals; and 3) remember, as best you can, when your symptoms first started.

What causes COPD?

COPD can be caused by many factors, although the most common cause is cigarette smoke. Inhaling irritating particles, such as smoke or air pollutants, can cause the mucus glands that line the bronchial tubes (bronchi) to produce more mucus than normal, and can cause the walls of the bronchi to thicken and swell (inflammation). This increase in mucus causes you to cough, frequently resulting in raising mucus (or phlegm). COPD can develop if small amounts of these irritants are inhaled over a long period of time or if large amounts are inhaled over a short period of time.

Environmental factors and genetics may also cause COPD. For example, heavy exposure to certain dusts at work, chemicals and indoor or outdoor air pollution can contribute to COPD. The reason why some smokers never develop COPD and why some never-smokers get COPD is not fully understood. Family genes or heredity probably play a major role in who develops COPD.

<http://www.thoracic.org/clinical/copd-guidelines/for-patients/what-is-chronic-obstructive-pulmonary-disease-copd.php#.U6szb02mYRw.email>