

Living Well with COPD:

Managing symptoms to live a healthier, more active life

COPD is a lung disease that makes it hard to breathe. In most cases, COPD is caused by smoking and will continue to get worse with ongoing exposure to smoke.

Even though there is not a cure for COPD, there are steps you can take now to manage your symptoms and lead a healthier, more active, life.

Quit smoking

This is the most important thing you can do for your health. It is never too late to quit. No matter how long you have smoked, or how serious your COPD is, quitting smoking now will help slow or stop further damage to your lungs. For help quitting, call Quit for Life at 1-800-462-5327.

Take your medicines as prescribed

Not taking medicine when you need it can make your condition worse.

- Use your daily inhaled medicine for COPD to help your airways work more effectively.
- Use your rescue medicine (such as albuterol) as needed. If you have chest tightness or more shortness of breath than usual, your rescue medicine will help open the airways in your lungs to make breathing easier.
- If your doctor ordered an oral steroid for you, use it when swollen and inflamed airways are causing more mucus production. Using oral steroids for a short time rarely causes side effects. Any side-effects you might have, such as sleeping problems, hunger, or weight gain, will probably go away when you stop taking the medicine.
- If the cost of medicine is a problem, talk to a pharmacist – there may be more affordable alternatives available. You can also talk to the social worker at your medical center. He or she can help you find out if you qualify for programs and resources that offer medicines free, or at a reduced cost.

If you have a flutter valve device know how and when to use it

If you have more mucus production than usual, and you have a flutter valve device (such as Aerobika) at home, use it at least 2 times a day, as directed, to help clear your airways.

Have a plan to deal with flare-ups

A COPD flare-up is when your symptoms quickly get worse and don't improve. These symptoms include shortness of breath, cough, and mucus production. A flare-up can be life-threatening.

Dealing quickly with flare-ups at home can help prevent you from having serious breathing problems. Work with your doctor to make a plan for dealing with a COPD flare-up. If you are prepared, you might be able to get it under control.

Avoid things that can irritate your lungs

- Don't smoke and don't allow others to smoke around you
- Avoid being near wood-burning stoves and fireplaces

Practice skills for better breathing

One of the reasons you might get short of breath, is that you're not clearing enough used air out of your lungs to make room for the incoming air.

Another problem for many people with COPD is that when they can't breathe, they start to panic. This makes it even harder for them to catch their breath. If this happens to you, try using relaxation and better breathing techniques. These techniques can help put you in control of your breathing.

Two techniques that can be very helpful in breathing better are called **Pursed Lip** and **Diaphragmatic (or Belly) Breathing**. Practicing pursed-lip and diaphragmatic breathing can help you get more oxygen into your lungs and help them work more efficiently.

Keep up your strength

Some people with COPD have trouble keeping their weight up and their bodies strong.

The 2 most important things you can do every day to stay as strong as you can are:

- Eat healthy meals. If you are losing weight, ask your doctor or dietitian how to make it easier to get the calories you need.
- Get at least 20 minutes of exercise and stay active throughout the day. Walk, ride a stationary bike, swim, garden, use the stairs, clean house. All activities count!

Maintain a healthy weight

While some people with COPD have trouble keeping their weight up, others are overweight. Extra body weight make breathing more difficult.

- If you are overweight, losing some weight can be more effective than inhalers in helping you to breath better.
- Talk to a member of your care team about a referral for nutritional counseling.

Get help dealing with stress and difficult emotions

COPD can affect more than your lungs. It can cause stress, anxiety, and depression. These things take energy and can make your COPD symptoms worse. But they can be treated. If you feel very sad or anxious, call your doctor.

Ask about pulmonary rehab

In pulmonary rehab, you'll have a team of health care professionals that specialize in lung conditions. They will help you learn how to manage your COPD, breathe easier, exercise, and eat well. Pulmonary rehab can help you train your mind, muscles, and heart to use your lungs most efficiently.

Make sure your vaccines up to date

People who have COPD are more likely to get lung infections, so get a flu shot every year. You should also get a pneumococcal shot. It can't prevent all types of pneumonia, but if you do get pneumonia, you probably won't be as sick.

Use home oxygen if needed

Your health care team might recommend that you use home oxygen some or most of the time. This involves getting extra oxygen through a small tube that fits just inside your nose. Many people find that using home oxygen helps them to breathe more easily, feel stronger, and be more active throughout the day.

When to call for medical help

Call your doctor or Consulting Nurse Service if you have:

- Small amounts of blood in your sputum or are coughing up dark mucus
- More mucus, wheezing, coughing, or shortness of breath than usual
- Mucus that is thicker or has changed color to yellow, brown, or green
- Tightness or pain in your chest
- Harder time breathing than usual; you can't get a deep breath
- To lean forward in order to breath when you're sitting down
- Shortness of breath that get worse even after using rescue inhaler
- COPD flare-up
- Fever (your temperature is 100.5 degrees or higher)
- Faster heartbeat or a pulse that doesn't get back to normal
- Dizziness, confusion, or are sleepier than usual
- Headache that doesn't go away
- Trouble thinking or talking clearly
- Signs of being dehydrated, such as dark urine, dry tongue, cracked and dry lips
- Blue skin on your fingertips or around your fingernails
- Questions about your breathing or medicines

During clinic hours: Call a member of your primary care team

For medical advice after clinic hours: Call the Kaiser Permanente Consulting Nurse Service toll-free 24 hours a day: 1-800-297-6877.

For more information about living a healthier life with COPD

Visit the Health and Well Resources section of www.kp.org/wa . Under Conditions, diseases and symptoms, click on Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)