



MDwise

A McLaren Company

COPD: How to Create an Exacerbation Plan

If you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), your usual shortness of breath could suddenly get worse. You may start coughing more and have more mucus. This flare-up is called a COPD exacerbation.

A lung infection or air pollution could set off an exacerbation. Sometimes, it can happen after a quick change in temperature or being around chemicals.

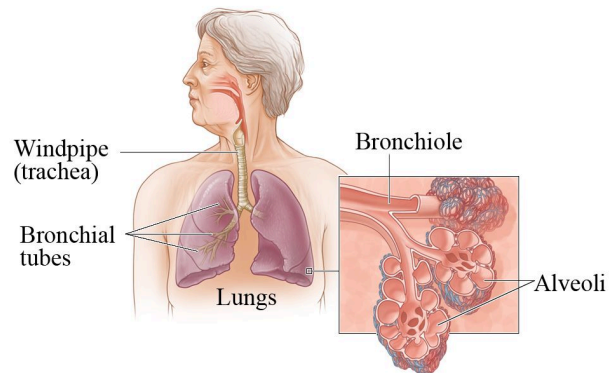
If you plan ahead, you can better manage an exacerbation.

Make a plan with your doctor

Work with your doctor to make a plan for dealing with an exacerbation. If you are prepared, you may be able to get it under control. **Do not panic** if you start to have one. Quick treatment at home may help you prevent serious breathing problems.

Take your medicines as your doctor tells you:

- First, use your quick-relief inhaler. If your symptoms do not get better after you use your medicine, have someone take you to the emergency room. Call an ambulance if necessary.
- With inhaled medicines, a spacer or a nebulizer may help you get more medicine to your lungs. Ask your doctor or pharmacist how to use them properly. Practice using the spacer in front of a



©Healthwise, Incorporated

mirror before you have an exacerbation. This may help you get the medicine into your lungs quickly.

- If your doctor has given you steroid pills, take them as directed.
- Your doctor may give you a prescription for an antibiotic, which you can fill if you need it.

Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

Preventing an exacerbation

Staying as healthy as possible may help you avoid an exacerbation.

- Stop smoking. This is the most important step you can take to slow further damage to your lungs. It is never

too late to stop smoking. Stop-smoking programs and medicines boost your chances of quitting for good.

- Avoid colds and flu. Get a flu shot each year, as soon as it's available. And ask those you live or work with to do the same, so they do not get the flu and infect you. If you must be around people with colds or flu, wash your hands often. Also, get a pneumococcal vaccine shot. If you have had one before, ask your doctor if you need another dose.
- Avoid secondhand smoke; air pollution; cold, dry air; hot, humid air; and high altitudes. Stay at home with your windows closed when air pollution is bad.

Effective breathing

You may find that you take quick, small, shallow breaths when you have COPD. Learning to relax with breathing techniques may help you deal with an exacerbation.

- **Diaphragmatic breathing** helps your lungs expand so that they take in more air. Lie on your back or prop yourself up on several pillows. With one hand on your belly and the other on your chest, breathe in, pushing your belly out as far as possible. You should be able to feel the hand on your belly move out, while the hand on your chest should not move. When you breathe out, you should be able to feel the hand on your belly move in. Once you can do diaphragmatic breathing well while you are lying down, you can learn to do it while sitting or standing. Many, but not all, people with COPD find this breathing method helpful. Practice diaphragmatic breathing for 20 minutes, 2 or 3 times a day.
- **Pursed-lip breathing** may help you breathe more air out so that your next breath can be deeper. In this type of

breathing, you breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth while almost closing your lips. Breathe in for about 2 seconds, and breathe out for 4 to 6 seconds. Pursed-lip breathing decreases shortness of breath.

- **Breathing while bending forward** at the waist may make it easier for you to breathe. Bending forward while breathing may decrease shortness of breath in those with severe COPD, both at rest and during exercise. This may be because bending forward allows the diaphragm to move more easily. The diaphragm is a large sheet of muscle that separates your lungs from your belly. It helps draw air into your lungs as you breathe.

When to call your doctor

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have severe trouble breathing.
- You have severe chest pain.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new or worse shortness of breath.
- You develop new chest pain.
- You are coughing more deeply or more often, especially if you notice more mucus or a change in the color of your mucus.
- You cough up blood.
- You have new or increased swelling in your legs or belly.
- You have a fever.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You need to use your antibiotic or steroid pills.
- Your symptoms are getting worse.



©2007-2022 Healthwise, Incorporated. Healthwise disclaims any liability for use of this information, which does not replace medical advice. 2021-07-zp3704