

COPD Flare-ups

Lung Attacks



What is COPD?

COPD stands for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—the current name for chronic bronchitis and emphysema. COPD is a chronic disease that makes it hard to move air in and out of your lungs. Once you have COPD, it never goes away. But there are ways to manage your COPD and treat your symptoms.

What does COPD do to my lungs?

COPD slowly damages your airways, the breathing tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs. COPD makes airways inflamed (swollen) and partly blocked by mucus. It also damages the tiny air sacs at the tips of your airways. This makes it hard to move air in and out of your lungs, get oxygen (new air) into the body, and remove carbon dioxide (stale air).

What is a COPD flare-up?

A COPD flare-up or lung attack happens when usual COPD symptoms get worse over a short period of time (a few hours to 48 hours), or when new symptoms develop. Flare-ups are also called exacerbations. A flare-up can be caused by a lung infection, such as a cold or the flu, smoking and exposure to air pollution, including second hand smoke.

If you have COPD, it is important to prevent flare-ups and understand the signs and symptoms of flare-ups. A COPD flare-up may cause further damage to your lungs.

To manage your COPD, you need to know:

- how to prevent flare-ups
- warning signs and symptoms of a flare-up
- what to do if you have a flare-up, including when to get emergency help



Symptoms and warning signs of a COPD flare-up, and what to do

Top 3 symptoms of a flare-up:

- **an unusual increase in shortness of breath**
- **increased cough**
- **an increase in the amount, thickness or stickiness of your mucus (phlegm) which may be more yellow, green or brown than usual**

Other signs and symptoms that may suggest a COPD flare-up:

- **fever**
- **symptoms of a common cold, such as head ache, runny nose, or sore throat**
- **swollen ankles**
- **feeling fatigued and generally unwell**

What to do if you have these symptoms

If you notice any of these symptoms, follow the advice in your written COPD Action Plan. If you don't know what to do or if your COPD Action Plan isn't helping and your symptoms are getting worse, call your health-care provider. If you can't reach your health-care provider, go to the nearest hospital emergency department. Act within 48 hours. Do not try to wait it out hoping that you will get better.

Warning signs of a severe COPD flare-up

Call 911 if you have these signs:

- **chest pain**
- **blue lips or fingers**
- **confusion, can't think clearly, or very agitated (upset)**
- **drowsy**
- **extremely short of breath**



Treatment for a COPD flare-up

It's very important that you treat your COPD flare-up as early as possible. If you treat a flare-up early, you are less likely to need hospital care.

To treat a flare-up, follow the instructions in your COPD Action Plan.

A COPD Action Plan gives written instructions from your health-care provider on what to do when your symptoms flare up. Your COPD Action Plan will tell you what extra medicine to take, when to call the health-care provider, and when to go to the emergency department.

Your written COPD action plan can help to prevent and treat COPD flare-ups. Remember there are other reasons you may get short of breath, such as pneumonia or heart problems. If you develop shortness of breath and you do not have symptoms to suggest a COPD flare-up, contact your health-care provider.

How to prevent COPD flare-ups

- Quit smoking: It's the best way to prevent COPD and slow down disease prevention.
- Take all of the medications prescribed by your doctor. Ask for help if you have questions about how or when to take medications or what they're for. Ask your health-care provider to go over inhaler technique with you and learn how to use them properly. Review inhaler technique at every visit.
- Exercise regularly. Many communities offer pulmonary rehabilitation programs. To find one in your area, go to www.lung.ca/COPD.
- Avoid triggers that can make COPD worse, like air pollution, cigarette smoke and breathing very cold—or hot—or humid—air.
- Take good care of yourself. Eat healthy foods, exercise regularly, and get enough sleep. Staying healthy will help your body fight infections.
- Get your flu shot every year. Ask your health-care provider if you need a pneumonia shot.
- Stay away from people who are sick with a cold or flu.
- Wash your hands properly and often.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Many people catch colds, flu, and other contagious lung infections from germs on their hands.
- Ask your health-care provider for a personalized written COPD Action Plan.



Working with your health-care team

It is important to make sure your health-care team is aware of any flare-ups. Every time you have a flare-up write down your symptoms and what happened. For example, if you spent time in the hospital, make sure you record the dates in the hospital and the medications you have taken. Take the diary with you to medical appointments.

COPD Flare-up Diary

Date of flare-up			
COPD symptoms			
What COPD medications did you take?			
Did you take any antibiotics?			
Did you take any steroids (e.g. — prednisone)?			
Do you have to go to the hospital or see a health care provider?			

There may be a time during your flare-up that you are not able to communicate your wishes for treatment. Let close family members know about your COPD, and what you want for your future health and personal care. Talk to people close to you, especially your Substitute Decision Maker—the person who will speak for you when you cannot.

For more information on COPD, call our toll-free helpline at **1-866-717-COPD (2673)** and talk to one of our certified respiratory educators, who are health-care providers specially trained in COPD.



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www.lung.ca/COPD

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