

Health Education Fact Sheet

From Nurses for You

Nursing Best Practice Guideline

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) – Helping You Breathe Easier

Many older adults have problems with shortness of breath. If you are over the age of 40 and are a smoker you may be at risk for developing Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). Smoking is the main cause of COPD, but breathing in second hand smoke, other chemicals and pollution may also put you at risk.

What is Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)?

COPD is a name used to describe lung problems such as chronic asthma, chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Someone with COPD may have:

- Shortness of breath while walking or changing clothes
- A cough that does not go away
- A high pitched squeal when breathing
- A cough producing mucous that may be yellow or green

What will you be asked if you meet with a doctor or nurse?

A doctor or nurse can find out more about your breathing problems by asking you some questions. Some of these questions might be:

- Do you or does someone in your house smoke?
- Do you have any allergies?
- Are you on any medications?
- Do you have a cough that won't go away?
- How long have you had this cough?
- Have you been sick with a cold lately?
- Have you lost weight lately?
- When you cough up mucous, what colour is it?
- Are you short of breath when walking for a few minutes?

What should you do if you have shortness of breath?

If you have trouble breathing you should see your doctor as soon as possible. If you smoke you should think about quitting. A doctor or nurse can give you information and assist you to quit smoking. If you have been told that you have COPD and you are short of breath you should:

- Stop what you are doing
- Get into a comfortable position with your head and shoulders rolled forward
- Breathe in through your mouth



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- Purse your lips and breathe out – like you are blowing out a candle
- Think about slowing down your breathing with each breath
- Begin to breathe in through your nose
- Use your belly muscles to breathe. Put your hand on your belly and push your belly against it with each breath
- Relax until you feel better

What can you learn from a nurse?

A nurse can teach you how to deal with breathing problems. You may learn:

- How to use a wheeled walker if you need it
- Other ways of breathing when you are short of breath
- How to cough better to get rid of mucous in your airway
- The importance of eating healthy foods
- How to use your inhalers
- How to save your energy
- How to exercise safely
- How to quit smoking

How do you manage your day when you are short of breath and have little energy?

It is important for you to learn how to do your work and not become too tired. You can learn how to pace yourself and save your energy. You need to:

- Make a list of what needs to be done and do what has to be done first
- Make sure you are working with equipment at the right height
- Have someone help you to clean and sort out your work area
- Have a balance between activity and rest
- Get help with your work when you can
- Plan to have a lot of time to finish your work
- Maintain good posture
- Take frequent breaks
- Rest after meals
- Use slow movements

What can you do to stay healthy?

There are several things you can do to help you with your breathing. You can:

- Learn how to relax to reduce worry and shortness of breath
- Learn to laugh and focus on the good things in your life which help reduce stress
- Listen to music that makes you feel good
- Learn yoga breathing styles to help with shortness of breath
- Learn how to change position to help when short of breath
- Use fresh air or a fan to help when short of breath

The intent of this fact sheet is to inform you so you can make choices about your health. This fact sheet and our “Deciding to Quit Smoking” fact sheet are available on our website for free download. To find out more about our fact sheets and guidelines, please visit our website at www.rnao.org/bestpractices



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