

# COPD

LEARN MORE  
BREATHE BETTER®

A program of the National Institutes of Health.



## WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT COPD? TAKE THESE SMART STEPS.

COPD is a leading cause of death in America today. More than 16 million people have been diagnosed with COPD and several additional millions likely have it, but don't know it. And while there is no cure yet, there is plenty we all can do to help get people diagnosed earlier so that COPD can be managed better. By taking these smart steps, you can make a healthy difference.

### STEP 1: KNOW THE BASICS.

COPD—Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease—permanently damages the airways and air sacs in the lungs. They lose elasticity and cannot “bounce back” into shape after each breath inhaled stretches them to fill with air. The airways can also become swollen or thicker than normal and become blocked or obstructed by increased mucus, making it even harder to exhale.

### STEP 2: GET SOME BACKGROUND.

COPD most often occurs in people age 40+ who:

- **Are or were smokers.** While smoking is the most common cause, as many as one in four people with COPD never smoked.
- **Have had long-term exposure to lung irritants,** such as certain workplace chemicals, dust or fumes, as well as to air pollutants, like secondhand smoke.
- **Have a rare genetic condition.** It is estimated that close to 100,000 Americans have alpha-1 antitrypsin, or AAT, deficiency. They can get COPD even if they never smoked or were exposed to irritants or air pollutants.

### STEP 3: NOTICE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS.

COPD comes on gradually and worsens over a number of years. People get so used to living with COPD, they aren't always aware of their symptoms and how the disease limits their quality of life and ability to do things. You can help by looking and listening for these telltale symptoms:

- Constant coughing, sometimes called “smoker's cough”
- Shortness of breath while doing everyday activities, such as light housework, taking a walk or even getting dressed
- Excess sputum
- Feeling unable to breathe
- Not able to take a deep breath
- Wheezing



COPD Learn More Breathe Better®  
is a trademark of HHS.



#### **STEP 4: START THE CONVERSATION.**

- As soon as you notice signs and symptoms, make an appointment with a health care provider.
- If you notice signs and symptoms in a loved one, remind them that the sooner COPD is diagnosed, the better they'll be able to breathe and live. And offer to go along to the doctor's visit.

#### **STEP 5: MAKE THE MOST OF A DOCTOR'S VISIT.**

##### **If you're the patient or a loved one:**

- Before the appointment, make a list of all breathing symptoms, as well as activities no longer possible because of shortness of breath. Share these with your doctor.
- Bring a list of all medications currently being taken.

##### **If you're a health care provider:**

- Have information and screening resources available in your office.
- Encourage a dialogue about all symptoms.
- Emphasize that COPD is treatable.

#### **STEP 6: HELP SPREAD THE WORD.**

Whether you are an individual or member of a large group, you can help people in your community who are affected by COPD by:

- Encouraging them to see and talk honestly with a health care provider.
- Hosting an informal discussion about COPD at a community center or online forum.
- Make COPD the topic at one of your group's regular meetings. Bring friends or family members you think may be at risk.
- Set up a COPD information table at community events.
- Hold a luncheon, respiratory rally, health fair or spirometry screening.

#### **STEP 7: USE AND SHARE THESE RESOURCES.**

Visit [COPD.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://COPD.nhlbi.nih.gov) for information, tools and other informative, helpful resources.

**WHAT CAN YOU  
DO ABOUT COPD?**