

## Signs and Symptoms of COPD

COPD MINI-SERIES #2

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can cause shortness of breath, tiredness, production of mucus, and cough. Many people with COPD develop most, if not all, of these signs and symptoms.

### Why is shortness of breath a symptom of COPD?

Shortness of breath (or *breathlessness*) is a common symptom of COPD because the obstruction in the breathing tubes makes it difficult to move air in and out of your lungs. This produces a feeling of difficulty breathing (refer to COPD Mini-series handout #1). Unfortunately, people try to avoid this feeling by becoming less and less active. This plan may work at first, but in time it leads to a vicious cycle: avoiding activities leads to getting out of shape or becoming deconditioned, and this can result in even more shortness of breath with activity.

### What can I do to treat shortness of breath?

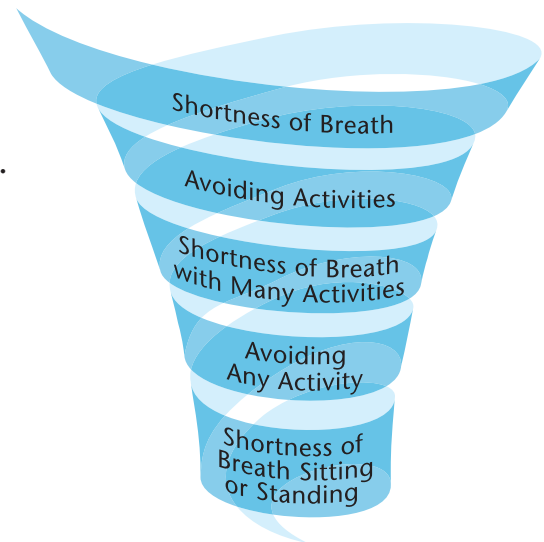
If your shortness of breath is a result of COPD, you can do several things:

- Take all of your medications regularly as prescribed. If you do not think that your medications are helping your shortness of breath, talk to your healthcare provider, but don't stop the medication.
- Begin a regular exercise program to build-up your strength.
- Learn about paced breathing and ways of breathing more efficiently with activities.

Pulmonary rehabilitation programs offer an exercise program and teach you how to control your shortness of breath. Breathing support groups offer more general information. To locate a rehabilitation program or support group, contact your local American Lung Association (1-800-LUNG-USA or [www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)).

### When should I call my healthcare provider about my shortness of breath?

If your shortness of breath is new, or it worsens for no known reason, call your healthcare provider. Describe to your provider when the shortness of breath started, how long it has lasted, and what makes it better or worse.



### Is tiredness a symptom of COPD?

Tiredness (or *fatigue*) is a common symptom in COPD. Tiredness discourages a person from keeping active, which leads to greater loss of energy, which then leads to more tiredness. When this cycle begins it is sometimes hard to break.

### What can I do to increase my energy level?

If you and your healthcare provider find that your tiredness is from your COPD, begin a regular program of exercise to build your strength. Learn about paced breathing and ways of breathing with less effort during activities. Consider going to a breathing support groups offered by your Lung Association or enrolling in a pulmonary rehabilitation program.

### When should I call my healthcare provider about my tiredness?

Call your healthcare provider when unexpected tiredness does not go away. Describe when the tiredness started, how long it has lasted, and what makes the tiredness better or worse.

### Is mucus production a symptom of COPD?

Excess mucus (phlegm or sputum) can be a symptom of COPD. It is normal for the breathing tubes to produce several ounces of mucus a day. Mucus is needed to keep the breathing passages moist. This mucus is normally swallowed without

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even knowing that you are doing so. However, when the lungs are infected or bothered by irritants, they try to protect themselves by producing more mucus than normal, which often makes you cough.

### Should I look at the mucus I cough up?

Mucus needs to be coughed up and you need to look at it. Swallowing small amounts of mucus is not known to cause health problems, but looking at your mucus can give you an idea of what is happening in your lungs. It is best to cough your mucus into a disposable tissue so that you can see the color, thickness, and amount of mucus. Describing your mucus to your healthcare provider is helpful.

### How can I lessen the amount of mucus produced in my lungs?

If you smoke, stop smoking. Everyone should avoid smoke and limit exposure to other items that can cause irritation to the lungs, such as pollution and fumes (paints, cleaning products and perfumes). Besides avoiding irritants, medicines like bronchodilators (to open up the breathing tubes), expectorants (to make the mucus easier to cough out), mucolytics (to thin thick mucus) and antibiotics (to treat infection in the lung) can be used.

### When should I call my healthcare provider about changes in mucus?

For people with COPD, it is important to contact your healthcare provider soon after noticing a change in your mucus. Generally, a change in the color, thickness, and/or the amount of mucus is a sign that there is something abnormal going on in your lungs. Call your healthcare provider if you cough up blood or mucus that is deep yellow or green.

### Is coughing a symptom of COPD?

A cough is common with COPD. Coughing can be a result of the lungs trying to remove extra mucus (phlegm or sputum) or it can be a way for the breathing tubes to protect themselves from inhaled irritants. Coughing is a good thing when it moves mucus out of the lungs because if large amounts of mucus stay in the breathing tubes, it can prevent oxygen from entering into the blood or can result in pneumonia. For this reason, your healthcare provider may *not* recommend medication to prevent your cough.

### What can I do to stop my cough?

Cough due to smoking will probably not go away

until you stop smoking. Cough due to other irritants can sometimes be controlled with throat lozenges (cough drops). Drinking plenty of fluids, which can help loosen and thin the mucus, can help coughing due to thick, sticky mucus. If fluids do not lessen the coughing, other possible treatments include a bronchodilator, cough expectorant, or a mucolytic. Coughing that produces increased shortness of breath may require an inhaled bronchodilator (to open up the breathing tubes) or an inhaled steroid (to reduce the swelling in the breathing tubes). Cough that does not produce mucus or becomes severe and difficult to control may be controlled with cough *suppressants* that are prescribed by your healthcare provider.

### When should I call my healthcare provider about my cough?

Most coughing is not dangerous. You should call your healthcare provider if you notice any of the following: unexplained cough; severe cough; or coughing that causes you to black out.

Source: ATS/ERS Standards for the Diagnosis and Management of Patients with COPD, <http://www.thoracic.org/COPD/18/signs.asp>

#### Additional Lung Health Information

##### **American Thoracic Society**

[www.thoracic.org](http://www.thoracic.org)

##### **ATS Patient Advisory Roundtable**

[www.thoracic.org/aboutats/par/par.asp](http://www.thoracic.org/aboutats/par/par.asp)

##### **National Heart Lung & Blood Institute**

[www.nhlbi.nih.gov/index.htm](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/index.htm)

##### **American Lung Association**

[www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

## Rx *What to do...*

- ✓ Stop smoking and avoid smoke exposure.
- ✓ Call your healthcare provider if you cough up blood or mucus that is deep yellow or green.
- ✓ Call your healthcare provider if coughing is violent or causes you to black out.

**Doctor's Office Telephone:**

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