COPD
Your complete guide to Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease.
You’ve just been diagnosed and you may be wondering...

**What is COPD?**

**Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)** is a serious disease, usually caused by long-term damage to the lungs and airways, which makes it difficult to breathe. COPD is a chronic and progressive condition, so it will never completely go away and symptoms can get worse over time. But there are treatments that may help you breathe better.

**Don’t be scared.** This is a complete guide that will help answer your questions in a simple and effective way.

It’s important to talk to your doctor and seek treatment as soon as you start showing symptoms of a persistent breathing problem.

**Emphysema and chronic bronchitis are the 2 conditions that make up COPD. You could have one of them or both.**

**Emphysema** damages the air sacs (alveoli) in your lungs, making it hard to exhale. In **chronic bronchitis**, airway irritation and mucus production mean that air has a hard time getting through.

If you’re not sure you understood your diagnosis, follow up with your doctor. And if you haven’t been diagnosed with COPD but are experiencing constant breathing problems—especially shortness of breath—talk to your doctor right away.
How many people have COPD?

The truth is, you’re not alone.

- **16 million** people in the United States have been diagnosed with COPD.
- Up to **12 million** more have yet to be diagnosed, and may not even be aware that they have this condition.

What causes COPD?

COPD is caused by long-term exposure to things that irritate your airways and damage the air sacs in your lungs. While smoking is the main cause of COPD, other causes can include:

- air pollution
- chemical fumes
- dust
- smoke

If you have asthma, be sure to mention this to your doctor before starting any treatment, as you may not be able to safely use certain daily maintenance medications to treat your COPD.
What are the symptoms of COPD?

Many people can live with COPD for a while before the symptoms start to impact their daily lives.

But as COPD progresses, symptoms become more severe, and may include:

- A persistent mucus (“smoker’s cough”)
- Shortness of breath, mostly brought on by physical activity
- Chest tightness
- Wheezing, whistling, or a squeaky sound when you breathe

If you experience any of these symptoms for more than a few weeks, you should see a doctor immediately.

Certain triggers can cause COPD symptoms to worsen. It’s important to avoid or limit exposure to known triggers, like extreme hot or cold weather, air pollution, infections, and stress. They also limit your daily activities. You may find yourself doing less and less over time.

Tell your doctor how you’re feeling and if you’re still smoking.

Even though it’s not always easy to talk openly with your doctor, it is the best way to find out how to better manage your symptoms and even to get tips to help you quit.
What are flare-ups?

Sometimes, the symptoms of COPD can turn into something more serious. It’s called a flare-up. Your doctor might call it an exacerbation.

It’s a sudden worsening of COPD symptoms, including:

- Uncontrollable coughing
- Increased mucus production
- Extreme fatigue
- Urgent shortness of breath

It can happen at any time, leaving your breathing much worse than it was before. One flare-up can lead to another and another, and can lead to hospitalization or even death—but they aren’t inevitable.

Certain treatments can help reduce the risk of a flare-up from happening in the first place. And some are even steroid free.

Be sure to have a plan of action with your doctor should you experience a flare-up.

What are the treatment options?

Many COPD medicines are inhaled, so they reach your lungs directly. You have probably heard about rescue inhalers and maintenance inhalers, but do you know the difference between them?

**Rescue inhalers**

Provide fast relief for sudden symptoms, but aren’t meant for long-term control.

**Maintenance inhalers**

Can help improve lung function and control COPD symptoms long term. While some maintenance medicines contain steroids, there are also steroid-free options. It’s important to take your medicine as directed by your doctor whether you feel symptoms or not.

Learn how to prepare and use a maintenance inhaler at TheMist.com
Talking to your doctor

Your doctor can offer valuable support as you manage COPD.

With COPD, your symptoms and needs may change over time. That’s why it’s important to build a trusting relationship with your doctor.

Your doctor can help:

- **Answer questions** about COPD and available medicines
- **Evaluate the severity of your COPD** and keep an eye on changes in your condition
- **Teach you how to manage** COPD at home
- **Oversee preventive health efforts**, such as flu shots and stopping smoking

Here’s a tip:

If you have difficulty talking to or understanding your doctor, **bring a family member or friend to your next appointment**. It’s a great way to build up your support system. Also, don’t forget to write down questions before your appointment and take notes while you’re there.
COPD Resources

The best thing you can do is to stay informed. Below are some important resources that may provide tips, support, and guidance about COPD online and in social media.

**COPD Foundation**  
COPDFoundation.org  
Facebook: fb.com/COPDFoundation  
Twitter: @COPDFoundation

**CHEST Foundation**  
Foundation.chestnet.org  
Facebook: fb.com/accpchest  
Twitter: @accpchest

**Caregiver Action Network**  
CaregiverAction.org  
Facebook: fb.com/CaregiverActionNetwork  
Twitter: @CaregiverAction