



# COPD: What is it?

Information to improve your health from Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, is a chronic, progressive disease that makes breathing difficult. Typical symptoms include coughing, increased mucus production, a tight feeling in your chest, shortness of breath, wheezing, and other symptoms related to your lungs and airways.

## COPD and You

To help control your COPD symptoms, it's important to stay educated and take proactive steps. In this newsletter you can read about treatment options for COPD, how to handle a flare-up, and ways you may be able to increase your lung capacity.

The purpose of this newsletter is to help you control your COPD symptoms and live your best life. We hope you find this information helpful.

**Thank you for reading!**



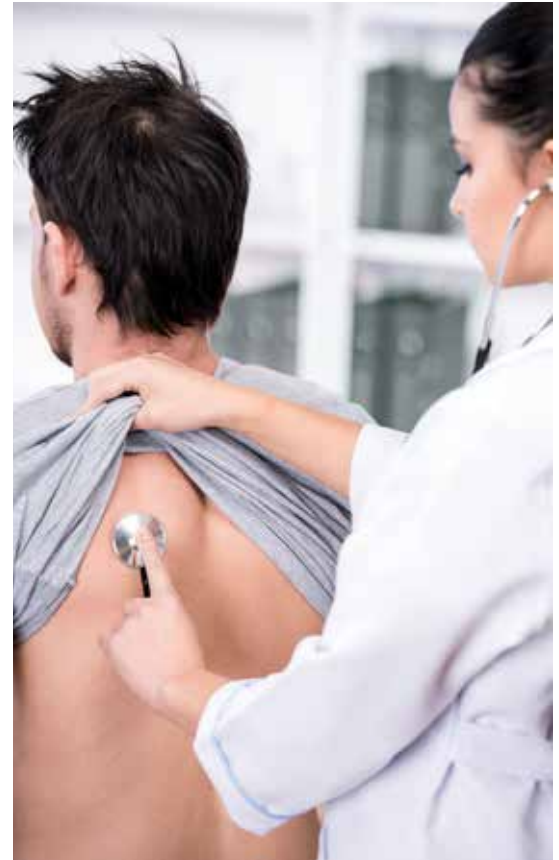
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# Treatments for COPD

Treatments for COPD are designed to reduce symptoms and help you breathe easier. If it's easier to breathe, it's easier for you to be physically active. And that is one of the best ways to fight COPD. Below are some treatments prescribed by doctors:

MEDICINES	
<b>Bronchodilators</b>	<p>These inhaled medicines deliver medication directly to your lungs through an inhaler. They are often used to treat persistent coughs and shortness of breath.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Short-acting:</b> work quickly on your symptoms.</li> <li>• <b>Long-acting:</b> work up to 12 hours and can be used to prevent symptoms.</li> </ul>
<b>Steroids</b>	<p>Steroids can reduce swelling in your airways making it easier to breathe. They can either be inhaled or taken in pill form depending on severity of symptoms. Some doctors prescribe combination inhalers which include both a steroid and a bronchodilator.</p>
<b>Phosphodiesterase-4 (PDE-4) Inhibitors</b>	<p>This is a fairly new entry on the market. This medicine may reduce swelling in the lungs and open airways. It is often paired with a bronchodilator.</p>
<b>Theophylline</b>	<p>While it may not control all symptoms, this can be more cost-effective than a traditional bronchodilator.</p>
<b>Antibiotics</b>	<p>Any infection can worsen COPD symptoms. Antibiotics may help fight bacterial infections in the lungs.</p>
<b>Vaccines</b>	<p>In addition to your yearly flu shot, your doctor may recommend the pneumonia or shingles vaccine to help prevent diseases that can worsen COPD symptoms.</p>



OTHER TREATMENTS	
<b>Pulmonary Rehabilitation</b>	<p>In this program, a team of doctors, nurses, dieticians, physical therapists and respiratory therapists will teach you ways to help keep your lungs healthy, exercise without losing your breath, and eating a healthy diet.</p>
<b>Oxygen Therapy</b>	<p>Some people with COPD cannot get enough oxygen through regular breathing. A doctor may recommend a home unit or portable tank to help you get more oxygen.</p>
<b>Surgery</b>	<p><i>In severe cases, surgery may be required. These include:</i></p> <p><b>Bullectomy:</b> Bullae are large spaces in your lungs which may develop from long-term COPD damage. This surgery removes those spaces.</p> <p><b>Lung Volume Reduction Surgery:</b> Sometimes doctors remove unhealthy parts of the lung to help the healthy parts expand. This can improve your oxygen intake.</p> <p><b>Lung Transplant:</b> A doctor takes out damaged lungs and replaces them with healthy lungs from a donor. This major surgery will require a lifetime of medicines so your body doesn't reject your new organ.</p>
<b>Lifestyle Change</b>	<p>This is by far the least-invasive treatment. A healthy lifestyle – including a healthy diet and exercise – can greatly improve COPD symptoms. In addition, if you smoke, QUIT! That may prevent your symptoms from worsening and might even reverse existing damage.</p>

You may experience side effects from any medicine or treatment. Be sure to discuss troubling or bothersome side effects with your doctor.

## TALK TO YOUR DOCTOR

It's important to come prepared for every doctor's appointment.

If you've been diagnosed with COPD, be sure to ask about:

- Lung function test
- Lifestyle issues such as smoking, diet and exercise

***Also, don't forget your flu vaccine once a year!***

# Handling Flare-Ups

COPD flare-ups can make you feel miserable. Your breathing may suddenly become extremely difficult, you may cough more and have more mucus. These could be signs of a COPD flare-up, also called a COPD exacerbation or attack.

## WARNING SIGNS

- Increased shortness of breath and wheezing
- Not getting relief from your inhalers
- A fever over 100.4 degrees
- Bloody or dark sputum (mucus)
- Chest pain
- Symptoms not improving within 24 hours

## COPD SCREENINGS

If you are experiencing a flare-up, screenings may help your doctor verify the severity of symptoms and prescribe appropriate treatments.

### Lung Function Tests

These are sometimes called pulmonary function tests (PFTs). This tells a doctor how much air your lungs can hold, how quickly you can breathe, and how well your body is taking in oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide.

### Spirometry

This common test tells a doctor how quickly you can get air in and out of your lungs. It helps a doctor determine how well your lungs work.

After treatment, most people recover from a flare-up. However, it may be a good idea to talk to your doctor to see if any treatment plan adjustments can be made to prevent future flare-ups.

In addition to having a specialist, it's always a good idea to consult with a dedicated primary care physician. Primary care physicians handle the "big picture" of your healthcare and can ensure that your COPD treatments align with any other treatment plans you have in place for other conditions and your overall health and wellbeing.

# 3 Ways to Increase Lung Capacity

Lung capacity refers to how much air you can take into your lungs. Taking in more air means more oxygen, and more oxygen can mean easier breathing. Here are a few things you can do to increase your lung capacity.

**BELLY BREATHING** If you were ever in a choir or took vocal lessons, you may have been taught to use your diaphragm, a skeletal muscle below your lungs that controls breathing. Learning to control your diaphragm may help you take in more oxygen. Repeat this process a few times a day:

1. **Sit back** or lie down and relax shoulders.
2. **Place a hand** over your chest and another over your belly.
3. **Breathe in** through your nose and feel the air push your abdomen out. Try to focus and make sure your stomach moves more than your chest.
4. **Breathe out** through your mouth while pushing gently on your belly for two seconds.

**RIB STRETCH** Try this easy exercise once a day to improve your lung capacity.

1. **Arch your back** and stand upright.
2. **Exhale** all air from your lungs.
3. **Breathe in** slowly until you refill your lungs.
4. **Hold** this for 10 seconds.
5. **Slowly exhale** and repeat.

**QUIT SMOKING** This one is self-explanatory. Every breath of smoke includes irritants that damage your lungs. When you quit smoking, not only does this reduce the irritants you breathe in daily, but it might also reverse existing lung damage which can improve your lung capacity.

## COPD FLARE-UPS: WHAT TO DO

### WARNING SIGNS

Shortness of breath or wheezing  
Coughing, with or without mucus  
Different colored mucus  
Fever  
Exhaustion  
Feeling unusually depressed and/or confused

### HOME TREATMENT OPTIONS

Take your quick-relief inhaler (bronchodilators) as prescribed by your doctor.  
Use a spacer or nebulizer to get more medication to your lungs. Ask your doctor or pharmacist about how to use these tools. Practicing using your spacer or nebulizer may help you get your medicine to your lungs quicker.  
Take steroid pills as prescribed, if prescribed, by your doctor.

### CALL 911 IF...

You have chest pain in addition to other warning signs.  
You try to breathe but feel like you're suffocating.  
If your symptoms do not get better after taking your quick-relief inhaler.



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