The Basics of COPD

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, is a group of lung diseases that causes breathing problems. These diseases include emphysema, chronic bronchitis and chronic asthma. Chronic means that the signs are present for a long time.

In emphysema (em-fi-SEE-mah), inflammation (swelling and irritation) damages the tiny air sacs (alveoli) in your lungs. Damage to the alveoli and narrowing of your airways leave you feeling short of breath, even when at rest or with little activity.

In chronic bronchitis and asthma, the large airways or bronchi are inflamed and swollen. The lining of the air tubes becomes swollen and produces large amounts of mucus. The mucus clogs the airways.

Symptoms of COPD
• Trouble breathing
• Shortness of breath
• Wheezing (high pitched whistling sounds)
• Excess mucus or phlegm
• Coughing
• Weak and tired
• Weight changes
• As oxygen levels become very low, a person’s lips, nails and skin may look blue.

Causes of COPD
• Smoking or being around smoke (the most common cause)
• Long-term exposure to things that irritate your lungs (working around smoke from burning grasses or structures, fumes from chemicals and dusts)
• Scarred or damaged lung tissue
• The lack of ATT, a substance that protects the elastic tissue of the lungs (a rare, inherited problem)

Diagnosing COPD
• Blood tests
• Chest X-ray and/or a CT Scan
• Lung function tests
• EKG (to test your heart)
• Family history of COPD

Treatment of COPD
• Since smoking causes most cases of COPD, quitting is the best way to slow the disease down; quitting may also give you more energy and reduce your risk of other health problems
• Avoid things that irritate your lungs
• Medications, including:
  – Bronchodilators (to open the airways)
  – Anti-inflammatory medicines (to decrease airway irritation)
  – Antibiotics (to fight infection in the mucus and airways)
  – Cough medicines (to thin the mucus)
• Oxygen: when your lungs can’t get enough to your body
• Learning pursed lip and diaphragmatic breathing
• Learning ways to conserve energy and live with COPD
• Getting vaccines for influenza and pneumonia

Mental Health:
It is common to feel angry, frustrated or depressed when you have COPD.
• Talk to friends and family about how you feel
• See a counselor and talk to your health care providers
• Find ways to continue your favorite activities
• Learn to relax using music, guided imagery or specific breathing ways

Continued
Living with COPD
Avoid things that irritate airways. Common irritants include smoke, fumes, allergens, dust and changes in weather.

Cigarette smoke:
• Find a way to quit smoking; call the Quit Line 877-QUIT-NOW or 877-270-7867
• Avoid second-hand smoke

Other smoke
• If used, wood burning stoves or furnaces should be well ventilated
• Do not use kerosene heaters
• Stay away from burning leaves
• Avoid smoke from grilling outdoors
• Don't burn logs in your fireplace

Household fumes
• Avoid strong fumes from cleaning products
• Use products that are poured or rubbed instead of those in spray cans
• Use a venting fan over the stove to get rid of cooking fumes

Dust
• If you must do a dusty job, cover your mouth and nose
• Have someone else clean your house when you aren’t home, and stay away for at least 45 minutes afterwards
• Change furnace and air conditioner filters often

Weather
• A scarf or a cold air mask over your mouth and nose can warm the air that is entering your lungs
• Keep the humidity about 40% to 50% year around
• Using a humidifier in winter also helps settle dust

Preventing pneumonia or the flu
• You should have a pneumonia shot
• Each fall get the Influenza “Flu” shot or flu mist
• Avoid close contact with people who have influenza or colds

Allergies
• If you know you are allergic to something, stay away from it as much as possible
• To avoid molds and pollen:
  – Be aware that fans draw in mold and pollen; close the windows and doors of your house and car
  – Stay inside in air conditioning when pollen and mold counts are highest
  – Avoid items like wet leaves, garden waste, stacked wood, standing water, areas of poor drainage
• Dust mites: cover your bed mattress, springs, and pillows in airtight vinyl covers. Wash all bedding in hot water. Don’t put carpet on your bedroom floor
• Your doctor will suggest medicine or allergy shots if you need them

Exercise and saving your energy
Exercise can help increase your energy level and make you feel better. We will help you set up an exercise program to safely increase your activity level. Start with:
• Warm up before exercising
• Set goals you can reach
• Choose activities that you enjoy
• Exercise with a friend
• Do not overdo it
• Stop and rest if you develop pain, shortness of breath or dizziness
• Cool down when you’re finished

There are many ways to save energy in your daily life by planning, pacing yourself and using simple methods. In general:
• Pace yourself and have planned rest times
• Use a cart to move objects, such as laundry, instead of lifting
• Keep frequently used items at waist height
• Sit to do activities such as preparing food, folding laundry and getting dressed
• Get everything you need together before starting an activity. For example, get your clothes together before getting dressed
• Plan your day and do the most important activities when you have the most energy

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.