

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

What is COPD?

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a serious lung disease that makes it harder to breathe. COPD includes conditions such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis, which cause airflow blockage and breathing-related symptoms that may worsen over time.

COPD has no cure, but it is treatable. Early diagnosis, medications, pulmonary rehabilitation, quitting smoking, and healthy lifestyle changes can help people manage symptoms and improve quality of life.

COPD Facts

- COPD is a leading cause of death and disability in the United States.
- Nearly 16 million U.S. adults have been diagnosed with COPD, and millions more may have COPD but do not know it.
- In 2023, COPD was associated with more than 141,000 deaths in the United States.
- COPD affects both men and women. Women have been diagnosed with COPD at higher rates than men in recent years.
- In New Hampshire, chronic lower respiratory diseases remain among the leading causes of death.

Common Symptoms of COPD

Symptoms may develop slowly and can include:

- Shortness of breath, especially during physical activity
- Chronic cough
- Wheezing
- Chest tightness
- Frequent respiratory infections
- Increased mucus production
- Difficulty completing everyday activities such as walking, climbing stairs, or grocery shopping

Who Is at Risk?

Risk factors for COPD include:

1. **Smoking or a history of smoking**
 - Cigarette smoking is the leading cause of COPD, but people who have never smoked can also develop COPD.

2. Exposure to lung irritants

- Long-term exposure to secondhand smoke, workplace dust, chemicals, fumes, air pollution, or other lung irritants can increase risk.

3. Age

- COPD is more common among adults over 40.

4. Genetic factors

- Certain inherited conditions, including alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, can increase the risk of developing COPD.

When Should You Talk to a Healthcare Provider?

Talk with a healthcare provider if you:

- Are over age 40 and currently smoke or have smoked in the past
- Experience ongoing shortness of breath, coughing, or wheezing
- Notice changes in your ability to complete daily activities
- Have frequent respiratory infections

A simple breathing test called spirometry can help diagnose COPD.

Living Well With COPD

While COPD is a chronic condition, many people successfully manage their symptoms through:

- Quitting smoking or avoiding tobacco and nicotine products
- Taking medications as prescribed
- Participating in pulmonary rehabilitation
- Staying physically active
- Learning how to recognize and manage flare-ups
- Working with a healthcare team to create a treatment plan