

What is COPD?

When you have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, it is difficult to breathe.

Air is being blocked from flowing freely into and out of your lungs.

"It was scary. I couldn't catch my breath. It got to the point that I was, you know, breathing like that."
– Leta, Patient

"You're just lying there with no energy to do anything and you're just feeling weak." – Marilyn, Patient

"You're dealing with lung. You're dealing with your breathing. And without breathing you're not here. And, of course, I was scared." – Bill, Patient

You can learn to live with COPD. Learning more about COPD is a great first step.

"My doctor reassured me that everything would be okay and I'm satisfied with him." – Bill, Patient

To understand more about what COPD is, let's look at how the lungs normally work.

Basically, when we breathe in, air containing oxygen flows deep into your lungs.

Here it enters the bloodstream.

When we breathe out carbon dioxide, a waste product leaves the body.

Let's go in closer. Every time you breathe, air enters the windpipe, or trachea, travels into two bronchial tubes then flows into smaller and smaller airways until the oxygen flows into microscopic air sacs called alveoli.

There are millions of alveoli.

Here air containing oxygen fills the alveoli expanding them like balloons. Inside the alveoli, oxygen enters the bloodstream and carbon dioxide flows back into the alveoli.

When the alveoli deflate, carbon dioxide travels back up through the lungs and out of the body.

To help pull air into the body and push carbon dioxide out, the lungs count on breathing muscles.

The diaphragm, located below your lungs, is the strongest and largest muscle for breathing.

What is COPD?

When you breathe in, the diaphragm flattens and expands the chest outward in order to allow air to enter the lungs.

When you exhale, the diaphragm helps to push the air out of your lungs.

When you have COPD, changes inside the lungs make it harder to get air into and out of the lungs.

You may have chronic bronchitis, emphysema, severe asthma, or a combination.

Chronic bronchitis inflames the airways.

This inflammation causes swelling which narrows the airway.

It also causes more mucus to be produced, causing a chronic cough.

Both narrowed airways and mucus block air flowing in and out of the lungs.

Emphysema damages the alveoli. When this happens oxygen can't enter and carbon dioxide can't leave.

This leaves the lungs overly inflated.

The overly inflated lungs put pressure on the diaphragm, making it harder to breathe. This is known as air trapping.

As more and more alveoli are damaged, less oxygen enters the bloodstream, and you are more likely to have the symptoms of shortness of breath and feeling tired.

Additionally, people who have COPD are at increased risk for infections, colds, the flu and pneumonia.

COPD is a lifelong chronic disease that can be treated.

Now is the time to take an active role in managing your COPD. Work with your healthcare provider to develop a plan for your treatment.

"Treatment has helped me, absolutely, it has helped me." – Bev, Patient

"I've learned to look forward, to look forward to say that today I can do, and forward is today. It's a day at a time." – Marilyn, Patient