

COPD: What Happens to Your Lungs

Your lungs have a really important job—they help take in good, oxygen-rich air and exchange it for carbon dioxide that needs to be taken out of your body. This happens with every breath you take. Now, it's easy to think of your lungs as just two big air sacs inflating and deflating.

But they're actually a really complex system of bronchial tubes that connect to smaller tubes called bronchioles that finally connect to tiny little air sacs called alveoli. These little sacs are where the oxygen-for-carbon-dioxide exchange takes place.

But if you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—or COPD—your lungs can't work as well as they used to, and it's harder to breathe. COPD—usually caused by smoking—is a mixture of chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Here's what it does to your lungs. Chronic bronchitis causes the tubes in your lungs to become inflamed and narrowed, which makes it hard for air to move through the tubes. Emphysema actually causes several problems in your lungs.

It damages the elastic fibers that help push air out of your lungs when you breathe out. It damages the tiny air sacs where the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide happens.

And it causes the smaller bronchiole tubes to collapse when you breathe out, trapping carbon dioxide in the sacs. All of these changes caused by COPD cause excess mucus and more coughing, and make it harder to breathe.