

## **COPD: Common Questions and Concerns**

### **Why am I short of breath?**

Answer: Normal lungs are elastic which helps air flow in and out of the lungs. In COPD you lose the elasticity in your lungs. Loss of elasticity leads to air trapping in the lungs because you do not have enough time to fully exhale before you need to take your next breath. As the air gets trapped, breathing becomes shallow causing shortness of breath. Sometimes this causes a drop in your oxygen level as well.

Recommendations:

1. Exercise is the best treatment. Pulmonary rehabilitation is a program for people with lung problems. During rehab you learn about COPD while building strength and learning to breathe more effectively. Once the program is complete it is important to continue to exercise every day.
2. Medicines called bronchodilators are used to open the breathing tubes, allowing for better air flow in and out of the lungs. It is important to take these medicines as directed.

### **Why do I have phlegm?**



Answer: Phlegm is made when irritants such as smoke, dust, and air pollution are inhaled into the lungs or during lung infections. When you have COPD it can be harder to clear phlegm if your cough is weak or if you are making large amounts of phlegm.

Recommendations:

1. Stop smoking and don't allow others to smoke in your home or car.
2. Avoid activities outside on poor air quality days  
([http://www.airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=airnow.local\\_city&cityid=149](http://www.airnow.gov/index.cfm?action=airnow.local_city&cityid=149)).
3. Call your provider if you have colored phlegm or other signs of a lung problem such as more shortness of breath.
4. Use your COPD medicines as directed because they can help reduce phlegm production.
5. If you continue to have problems talk to your provider.

### **Why do I feel so tired?**



Answer: Tiredness or fatigue can be caused by low oxygen levels, age, being out of shape, anemia, heart failure, poor sleep, depression and other medical problems. Sometimes a combination of problems are to blame.

Recommendations:

1. Exercise.
2. Stay involved with friends/family and do things you enjoy
3. Tell your provider about the fatigue you are having. Tests will likely be needed to evaluate what is going on.
4. Tell your provider about any difficulty concentrating; loss of interest in things you use to like; feelings of sadness, unhappiness, hopelessness or worthlessness.

## **Which inhalers should I use?**



Answer: Medicines are given to match your symptoms or severity of COPD. Bronchodilators help open the breathing tubes for better air flow. Bronchodilators can be short acting (4-6 hours) or long acting (12-24 hours). If you have inflammation in the breathing tubes an inhaled steroid will also be used.

Recommendations:

1. Learn about your medicines.
2. Learn how to use the inhalers properly (bring them to clinic so the nurse can see if you are doing it correctly).
3. Tell your provider if you have trouble using or affording your medicines.
4. Tell your provider if you are having side effects to the medicine.
5. Take your medicines as directed.
6. Do not stop the medicines without talking to your provider first.

## **Do I need oxygen?**



You must qualify for oxygen before it is prescribed. Qualification can be done during your office visit, in the PFT lab or at home while sleeping. If you are in the office or the PFT lab and your oxygen is below 88% and gets better on oxygen you may qualify for oxygen. If your oxygen saturation is checked while sleeping and your oxygen level is below 88% for at least 5 minutes of the night you qualify to use oxygen while you are sleeping. Your provider will determine what test is best and when you should wear your oxygen.

Recommendations:

1. Talk to your provider if you feel short of breath during activity or at night.
2. Learn how to use oxygen safely.
3. Replace the tubing, mask or cannula as directed.
4. Clean the humidifier as directed.
5. If you are traveling (car, train or plane) call your oxygen company to inform them of your plans as soon as possible. Many airlines require paperwork before you can fly with oxygen.

## **What should I do if I get sick or have a flare up of COPD?**

It is important to recognize a change in your breathing as soon as possible so treatment can be started. Flare ups or infections can cause drops in oxygen, more phlegm and worsening air flow making your breathing worse. The most common signs of a flare up are worsening shortness of breath, wheezing, cough, fatigue, chest tightness and colored phlegm.

Recommendations:

1. Stop smoking. You will have less flare ups of COPD if you do not smoke.
2. If you have a COPD action plan follow the plan at the start of symptoms.
3. Call your provider when you notice a change in your breathing.
4. Keep up to date on vaccines especially the flu shot every year to help prevent infections.