

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS

January 2005

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease includes respiratory disorders such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema that make breathing difficult. Smoking is the most important cause of these diseases. If you smoke, quitting will reduce the severity of the disease and help you improve the quality of life over a much longer time.

Chronic bronchitis and emphysema

In chronic bronchitis, inflammation occurring in the bronchial tubes may cause narrowing, which makes breathing difficult. A chronic cough that brings up sputum is present.

In emphysema, lung tissue and the small air sacs (alveoli) at the end of the airways become damaged and air becomes trapped in the lungs leading to shortness of breath.

COPD Exacerbations

An exacerbation is a worsening of the condition that includes the following signs:

- rapid increase in cough
- mucus production (especially if yellow or green)
- increased shortness of breath
- blue lips or fingers

Exacerbations can be serious and life-threatening. Prompt and effective treatment can help most people recover to the level of breathing before the exacerbation.

Diagnosis

A medical history, physical examination and breathing tests are used to diagnose COPD.

Treatment

Although there is no cure for COPD, the best way to slow the progression of the disease is to quit smoking. Medications may reduce or relieve symptoms. Counseling, education, and exercise can help improve quality of life. Pulmonary rehabilitation programs are available in some areas and these have been proven effective.

Quitnow by phone

A free telephone service offering advice, information and support about quitting smoking. Call toll-free within British Columbia: 1 877 455-2233. Quitnow by phone is available 7 days a week, 24 hours a day.

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The BC Smokers' Helpline service is tailored to the individual needs of each caller.

- **Smokers who want to quit** can get information about all the different methods, help with deciding what method may be best for them, and what to expect once they quit.
- **People who have just quit** may wish information about coping with withdrawal, and how to manage concerns about things like weight gain or sleep disturbance.
- **Smokers who are thinking of quitting** can discuss the pros and cons with a trained Quit Specialist. And the best thing is: no hassle, no pressure.
- **Smokers who wish to keep smoking** are also welcome to call the line; they don't push anyone to quit smoking and don't judge people for smoking, and a chat may provide useful information.
- **Friends and family members concerned about someone's smoking** are encouraged to call to discuss what they can do to help.

Living with COPD

Remove factors that can worsen your condition such as smoking. Balance exercise and rest periods. Participation in a pulmonary rehabilitation program or a chronic disease self-management program can be helpful. The BC Lung Association has a list of contacts for Better Breathers clubs in different areas of the province (see web site below) or call **1 800 665-5864** for further information including other programs such as Breathworks **1 866 717-2673**.

End of Life Planning

Planning for end of life circumstances is necessary for many patients in the advanced stages of COPD.

Consider discussing end of life concerns with your physician and writing a legal document (advance directive) that helps ensure your health care wishes will be respected. An advance directive contains your preferences for treatment, a living will and a power of attorney. More details related to end of life care can be found at the BC HealthGuide web site listed below.

British Columbia Internet Resources

The BC Ministry of Health Chronic Disease Management web site has more detailed information about the management of diseases such as COPD.

<http://www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/cdm/patients/index.html>

The BC HealthGuide Online provides detailed information on managing COPD and end of life planning.

<http://bchealthguide.org/kbaltindex.asp>

BC Lung Association offers excellent materials for the control of COPD.

http://www.bc.lung.ca/services/services_copd.htm

**Contact the BC Lung Association or your local Health Authority
for access to a Pulmonary Rehabilitation Program**