

# MEDfacts

An Educational Health Series From National Jewish Health®



## RECOGNIZING SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF COPD

The early signs of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) for which many people seek medical attention before being formally diagnosed include marked shortness of breath with exertion, a cough that won't go away or frequent respiratory infections. This is often at a point when the disease is already advanced. Many people might be identified earlier if their doctors routinely screen all patients who are smokers or previous smokers.

Once COPD has been diagnosed recognizing worsening signs and symptoms of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is an important part of managing your illness. Knowing when symptoms are changing is helpful so that treatment and other interventions can begin quickly. Early treatment is most effective and likely preserves lung function long term. If severe symptoms are present, it is vital to begin the appropriate treatment right away. Accurate and timely assessment of your symptoms can help you and your health care provider decide if treatment should begin in the home, at your health care provider's office or in the emergency room.

Early symptoms or warning signs are unique to each person. These warning signs may be the same, similar or different with each episode. Usually you will be the best person to know if you are having trouble breathing. However, some changes are more likely to be noticed by other persons. It is important to share this information sheet with your family and those close to you.

A change or increase in the symptoms you often have may be the only early warning sign. You may notice one or more of the following:

- An increase or decrease in the amount of sputum produced
- An increase in the thickness or stickiness of sputum

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- A change in sputum color to yellow or green or the presence of blood in the sputum
- An increase in the severity of shortness of breath, cough and/or wheezing
- A general feeling of ill health
- Ankle swelling
- Forgetfulness, confusion, slurring of speech and sleepiness
- Trouble sleeping
- Using more pillows or sleeping in a chair instead of a bed to avoid shortness of breath
- An unexplained increase or decrease in weight
- Increased feeling of fatigue and lack of energy that continues
- A lack of sexual drive
- Increasing morning headaches, dizzy spells, restlessness

Symptoms do not go away when they are ignored. Therefore, knowing when to call your health care provider is very important in managing your chronic lung disease. It is very important for you to work with your health care provider to determine the best treatment for signs and symptoms of COPD.

### When to Call the Doctor

Call immediately if forgetfulness, confusion, slurring of speech or sleepiness occurs during an acute respiratory infection.

Call within 6-8 hours if shortness of breath or wheezing does not stop or decrease with inhaled bronchodilator treatments one hour apart.

Call within 24 hours if you notice one or more of the following severe respiratory symptoms:

- change in color, thickness, odor or amount of sputum persists
- ankle swelling lasts even after a night of sleeping with your feet up
- you awaken short of breath more than once a night
- fatigue lasts more than one day.

Severe respiratory symptoms are a life-threatening emergency. Have an action plan for getting emergency care quickly in the event of severe symptoms. Inform family members and those who are close to you of this emergency action plan.

It is very important to work with your health care provider to determine the best treatment steps for signs and symptoms of respiratory trouble. These are guidelines and your specific treatment plan should be determined by you and your health care provider.

While there are many effective measures you can do at home to treat signs and symptoms, there are also actions that should be avoided. If you do any of the following, it can make your condition worse:

- Do not take any extra doses of theophylline.
- Do not take codeine or any other cough suppressant.

- Do not use over-the-counter nasal sprays for more than 3 days.
- Use the prescribed liter flow of oxygen.
- Do not smoke.
- Do not wait any longer than 24 hours to contact your doctor if symptoms continue.

Note: This information is provided to you as an educational service of National Jewish. It is not meant to be a substitute for consulting with your own physician.

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