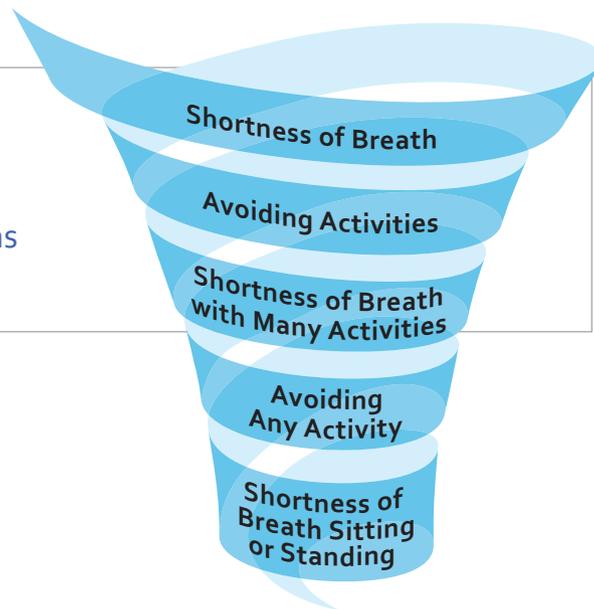


# Signs and Symptoms of COPD

COPD MINI-SERIES #2

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can cause shortness of breath, tiredness, production of mucus, and cough. Many people with COPD develop most, if not all, of these signs and symptoms.



## Why is shortness of breath a symptom of COPD?

Shortness of breath (or *breathlessness*) is a common symptom of COPD because the obstruction in the breathing tubes makes it difficult to move air in and out of your lungs. This produces a feeling of difficulty breathing (see *ATS Series on Breathlessness* at [www.thoracic.org/patients](http://www.thoracic.org/patients)). Unfortunately, people try to avoid this feeling by becoming less and less active. This plan may work at first, but in time it leads to a downward spiral of: avoiding activities which leads to getting out of shape or becoming deconditioned, and this can result in even more shortness of breath with activity.

## What can I do to treat shortness of breath?

If your shortness of breath is from COPD, you can do several things to control it:

- Take your medications regularly. If you do not think that they are helping your shortness of breath, talk to your health care provider, but don't stop the medication.
- Begin a regular exercise program to build-up your strength.
- Learn about paced breathing and ways of breathing more efficiently with activities.

Pulmonary rehabilitation programs (see *ATS Series on Pulmonary Rehabilitation* at <http://www.thoracic.org/patients>) offer an exercise program and teach you how to control your shortness of breath. Breathing support groups offer more general information. To locate a rehabilitation program or support group, see the resources listed.

## When should I call my health care provider about my shortness of breath?

If your shortness of breath is new, or it worsens for no known reason, call your health care provider. Describe to your health care provider when the shortness of breath started, how long it has lasted, and what makes it better or worse.

## Is tiredness a symptom of COPD?

Tiredness (or *fatigue*) is a common symptom in COPD. Tiredness may discourage you from keeping active, which leads to greater loss of energy, which then leads to more tiredness. When this cycle begins it is sometimes hard to break.

## What can I do to increase my energy level?

If you and your health care provider find that your tiredness is from your COPD, begin a regular program of exercise to build your strength. Learn about paced breathing and ways of breathing with less effort during activities. Consider going to a breathing support groups offered by your Lung Association or enrolling in a pulmonary rehabilitation program.

## When should I call my health care provider about my tiredness?

Call your health care provider when unexpected tiredness does not go away. Describe when the tiredness started, how long it has lasted, and what makes the tiredness better or worse.

## Is mucus production a symptom of COPD?

Excess mucus (phlegm or sputum) can be a symptom of COPD. It is normal for the breathing tubes to produce several ounces of mucus a day. Mucus is needed to keep the breathing passages moist. This mucus is normally swallowed without even knowing that you are doing so. However, when the lungs are infected or bothered by irritants, they try to protect themselves by producing more mucus than normal, which often makes you cough.

### Should I look at the mucus I cough up?

Mucus needs to be coughed up and you need to look at it. Swallowing small amounts of mucus is not known to cause health problems, but looking at your mucus can give you an idea of what is happening in your lungs. It is best to cough your mucus into a disposable tissue so that you can see the color, thickness, and amount of mucus. Describing your mucus to your health care provider is helpful.

### How can I lessen the amount of mucus produced in my lungs?

Smoking is a very common cause of mucus production. If you smoke, stop smoking. For help in quitting smoking see fact sheets at <http://www.thoracic.org/patients>). Everyone should avoid being around smoke and limit exposure to other things that can cause irritation to the lungs, such as pollution and fumes (paints, cleaning products and perfumes). Besides avoiding irritants, medicines like bronchodilators (to open up the breathing tubes), expectorants (to make the mucus easier to cough out), mucolytics (to thin thick mucus) and antibiotics (to treat infection in the lung) can be used.

### When should I call my health care provider about changes in mucus?

For people with COPD, it is important to contact your health care provider soon after noticing a change in your mucus. Generally, a change in the color, thickness, and/or the amount of mucus is a sign that there is something abnormal going on in your lungs. Call your health care provider if you cough up blood or mucus that is deep yellow, green or "putty" colored.

### Is coughing a symptom of COPD?

A cough is common with COPD. Coughing can be a result of the lungs trying to remove mucus (phlegm or sputum) or it can be a way for the breathing tubes to protect themselves from inhaled irritants. Coughing is a good thing when it moves mucus out of the lungs. Large amounts of mucus that stay in the breathing tubes can prevent oxygen from entering into the blood or can result in pneumonia. For this reason, your health care provider may *not* recommend giving you medication to prevent or suppress your cough completely. You want to use your cough well to get mucus out but not suffer with excessive coughing that is not helping you with mucus.

### What can I do to stop my cough?

Cough due to smoking will probably not go away until you stop smoking. Cough due to other irritants can sometimes be controlled with throat lozenges (cough drops). Drinking plenty of fluids can help if you have thick sticky mucus to help thin it and make it easier to cough out. If fluids do not lessen the coughing, other treatments include a bronchodilator, cough expectorant, or a mucolytic. Coughing that produces increased shortness of breath may require an inhaled bronchodilator (to open up the breathing tubes) or an inhaled steroid (to reduce the swelling in the breathing tubes). Cough that does not produce mucus or becomes

severe and difficult to control may be controlled with cough *suppressants* that are prescribed by your health care provider.

### When should I call my health care provider about my cough?

Most coughing is not dangerous. You should call your healthcare provider if you notice any of the following: unexplained cough; severe cough; or coughing that causes you to black out (pass out).

**Authors:** Suzanne C Lareau RN, MS, Paula Meek PhD, RN, Bonnie Fahy RN, MN

**Reviewer:** Marianna Sockrider, MD, DrPH

**Source:** ATS/ERS Standards for the Diagnosis and Management of Patients with COPD, <http://www.thoracic.org/clinical/copd-guidelines/index.php>

## Rx What to do...

- ✓ Stay active with regular exercise. Learn paced breathing and consider going to a pulmonary rehabilitation program.
- ✓ Stop smoking and avoid smoke exposure.
- ✓ Call your health care provider if you cough up blood or mucus that is deep yellow, green or putty colored.
- ✓ Call your health care provider if coughing is violent or causes you to black out.

**Doctor's Office Telephone:**

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## Additional Lung Health Information

**American Thoracic Society**

<http://www.thoracic.org/patients>

**COPD Foundation**

<http://www.copdfoundation.org/Learn-More/For-Patients-Caregivers/Healthy-Living.aspx>

**American Lung Association**

<http://www.lung.org/lung-disease/copd/connect-with-others/better-breathers-clubs/>

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