

Breathe Easy with COPD

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Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, also known as COPD, is the fourth leading cause of death in Kentucky and in the United States. Almost 1 in 10 Kentucky adults have been diagnosed with COPD by a doctor and it is estimated that even more people are living with the disease and don't even know it. Although this disease can be deadly, simple changes in lifestyle can reduce your risk of developing the disease or improve your health if already diagnosed.

What is COPD?

The name COPD is used to group several diseases together that make it hard to breathe

and damage the lungs. Other common diseases you may have heard of that fall under the category of COPD include emphysema and chronic bronchitis. These are not diseases you can catch from someone like the flu or a cold. COPD is not contagious.

How will someone know if they have COPD?

Some symptoms of COPD may include:

- Cough that won't go away
- Coughing up slime and mucus
- Unable to take deep breaths

- Hard to catch your breath after being active
- Getting tired while doing things that used to be easy
- Wheezing

A doctor or healthcare provider will need to complete a test called spirometry to know if you have COPD. This simple test measures the amount of air flowing in and out of your lungs as you breathe into a small machine.

What is happening to your body if you have COPD?

When we breathe, we take in oxygen through our nose and mouth that goes to our lungs. The oxygen is then transferred to our blood to be taken to all parts of our body. Our bodies turn food and oxygen into energy and carbon dioxide. For people with COPD, this becomes very difficult because the lungs are damaged or filled with mucus. The lungs are unable to take up enough oxygen and make the energy their body needs to function.



Are certain people more likely to be diagnosed with COPD than others?

It usually takes several years to develop COPD. Research tells us that exposure to pollution, like tobacco smoke, indoor/outdoor air pollution, dust and chemicals, can damage our lungs and cause COPD to develop over time. Although we know what the cause of COPD is, several people are more likely to be diagnosed than others.

These people are:

- Over 65 years of age
- Certain ethnicities such as American Indian
- Women
- Unemployed, retired, or unable to work
- Have less than a high school education
- Smoke or used to smoke
- Have asthma

How is COPD harmful to the body?

People who have COPD can't make enough energy from the oxygen they take in so they are often tired. Even small activities like walking up stairs may be very difficult. COPD also increases the risk of developing serious infections in the lungs. COPD is also harmful to the body because it makes it more

Table 1. Effects of COPD.

Mental	Physical
Depression	Unable to work
High stress and/or anxiety levels	Difficult to be social with friends and family
Living with fear of COPD	Unable to be physically active
Unable to socialize with friends and family	Unable to do household chores
Difficulty sleeping	Difficult to eat at restaurants
Confusion or memory loss	Need special equipment like oxygen tanks

difficult to heal from non-related illnesses, such as the flu or a cold.

In addition to the harm COPD causes to our body, it can also have serious mental and physical effects on the way we live our day-to-day lives. Listed in Table 1 are a few examples of these.

What role does nutrition play in COPD?

Although good nutrition won't cure COPD, it can make it much easier to live with the disease. Many people with COPD will have unwanted weight loss, difficulty eating, and poor nutrition. It is important to maintain a healthy weight when diagnosed with COPD. A person with COPD requires almost two times as much energy to breathe and function as someone without COPD. This means someone with COPD needs to take in enough energy through food to keep up with energy needs.

If someone is overweight or obese, it actually makes it more difficult to get around and breathe. This is why it is important to maintain a healthy weight. It may be necessary to talk to a registered dietitian (RDN) to develop an eating plan to reach or stay at a healthy weight and to receive enough energy for the body to function.

What can you do to prevent or manage COPD?

While there is no cure for COPD, it is great to know that COPD is preventable.

Focus on fruits and veggies. Research has shown that people with COPD who eat more fruits and vegetables have improved lung function compared to others who don't eat them. Eating brightly colored foods high in vitamins and minerals make it easier for your body to fight inflammation. A few brightly colored fruits and vegetables include strawberries,

blueberries, oranges, peppers, carrots, broccoli, and leafy green vegetables.

No smoking, please. The best way to prevent COPD is to avoid inhaling tobacco or cigarette smoke. Approximately 80 percent to 90 percent of COPD-related deaths are a result of smoking.

Prevention starts early. COPD usually develops after several years of exposure to pollutants like tobacco smoke. You could prevent COPD from developing if you start protecting yourself from pollutants at an early age.

If my family member has COPD, how can I help them breathe easier?

- Be patient. It may take them longer to do simple tasks like walk up a flight of stairs or eat a meal.

- Help prepare simple, nutritious meals that are easy to chew.
- Family communication and trust can make a huge difference in someone's behaviors. Encourage them to follow instructions given by the doctor. This may include quitting tobacco products, taking medication, and/or improving physical activity.

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