

COPD Facts



According to the World Health Organisation, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is the third leading cause of death worldwide.

In Australia, around one in 7 people over the age of 40 have the illness.

The six risk factors for COPD are smoking, second-hand smoke, household air pollution, ambient particulate matter, ozone, and occupational particulates such as coal dust.

While there is no cure, there are things people with COPD can do to breathe more easily, stay out of hospital and improve their quality of life.



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COPD

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease



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WHAT IS CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE (COPD)?

COPD is a common lung disease caused by obstruction of the small airways within the lungs. It can be known as emphysema or chronic bronchitis.

Our lungs rely on the natural elasticity of the bronchial tubes and air sacs (alveoli) to breathe effectively. The lungs of people with chronic bronchitis produce more mucus and their bronchial tubes become inflamed and narrowed which may lead to chronic cough. In those with emphysema, the walls of the alveoli become fragile and they lose their elasticity, meaning they collapse when you breathe out and trap air in your lungs. Many experience a combination of both.

There's currently no cure for COPD but with early detection, there are treatments that can slow the progression of symptoms and improve the long-term outlook for patients.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Breathlessness, especially during physical activity
- Chronic cough
- Persistent sputum production
- Recurrent chest infections
- Chest tightness
- Wheezing
- Airway irritability

As the prevalence of COPD is much higher in those over the age of 40 and symptoms develop gradually, people often attribute their breathlessness to ageing or a lack of fitness. A good guide is to compare whether you tend to be more breathless than healthy individuals of your age.

WHO GETS COPD?

COPD essentially develops as a result of long-term exposure to airborne toxins. The main causal factor



in Australia and other developed countries is current or previous tobacco smoking.

Exposure to passive smoke, air pollution, occupational chemicals and dusts are other known risk factors. Household air pollution is an increasingly recognised cause of COPD, especially in migrants from countries where cooking and heating is done by burning coal and biomass fuels.

Genetic factors can also play a role, with the deficiency of an enzyme known as alpha-1 antitrypsin associated with early onset COPD.

WHY DO YOU NEED TO TREAT COPD?

Early diagnosis and treatment of COPD will result in better outcomes for you. A treatment programme which may include the use of inhalers and tablets, lifestyle changes and pulmonary rehabilitation through exercise and education, will be designed to improve your health through:

- Relieving breathlessness
- Improving exercise tolerance
- Slowing disease progression
- Reducing the complications of COPD
- Preventing and treating exacerbations (flare-ups) of disease
- Reducing the mortality associated with COPD

Although not curable, treating COPD can result in significant improvement in your quality of life.

DIAGNOSING COPD

The diagnosis of COPD is dependent on taking a careful history and performing a thorough physical examination. Specialised breathing tests are necessary and other tests are often required. These may assess the severity of disease, look for complications or exclude other possible diagnoses. Testing may include a chest x-ray or CT (CAT scan), blood tests, sputum sample testing, cardiac ultrasound and overnight sleep studies.

TREATING COPD

The most important thing you can do to prevent COPD and to slow its progression is quit smoking.

Current drug treatments improve symptoms and reduce the impact of infection. Bronchodilators and anti-inflammatory medications will help open up the airways. Annual flu and COVID vaccinations minimise the risk of worsening symptoms.

Exercise programs and pulmonary rehabilitation are important for maintaining fitness and minimising any effects on your muscles and bone density.

Our expert clinicians can assess COPD patients with a view to optimising symptom control and improving quality of life.

HOW CAN WE HELP YOU?

Our researchers study the prevalence and causes of COPD to find new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat the disease. We translate this into clinical practice, placing us at the forefront of medicine.

At the Woolcock Clinic, we can make an appointment for you to see a respiratory specialist who will work with you to find the cause of your symptoms. Once this is established, we can discuss treatment options and find the one that best suits you.

To find out more, go to www.woolcock.org.au/clinic.