



## Triggers and Flare-ups

When you have COPD your lungs have been weakened. They are unable to protect themselves from air pollution, or fight off colds. It is important to know how to avoid and prevent things that may make your COPD worse.

### Avoiding Triggers

Triggers are things that make your COPD worse. Many people with COPD find that dusty or smoky air makes it harder for them to breathe. Others may be affected by scents, cold air, indoor and outdoor air pollution, humidity or wind. As you learn what your triggers are, you can learn how to avoid them.

### Outdoor Air

Smog or low air quality days can happen at any time – not just in the summer. Poor air quality can be the result of a vehicle exhaust, forest fires, or any other wood smoke.

Stay informed about the air quality. Check the internet, listen to the radio, watch television, or read

the newspaper to find out about air quality alerts near you. When an alert is issued, stay inside, close the windows and turn on the air conditioner. Make sure you stay cool and drink enough water to stay well hydrated.

Whenever possible, avoid travelling during the rush hour and using underground parking.

### Indoor Air

Indoor air quality is just as important as outdoor air quality, especially if your COPD keeps you indoors. It is important to make sure the air you breathe inside is as clean as possible. Keep indoor air clean by making your home smoke-free. Air out your living environment. Keep fresh air moving. Keep rooms clean and uncluttered and dust often.

Try not to use chemicals in your home. Paint, varnish, household cleaning products, hair spray and perfume can trigger breathing problems. Avoid things with strong smells and use natural cleaning products instead.

## Avoiding Flare-ups

A flare-up is the worsening of your COPD symptoms. They are the main reason people with COPD go to the hospital. Flare-ups should be taken very seriously.

They are usually caused by a trigger such as air pollution or allergens, or a chest infection from a virus (cold or flu) or bacteria. Do your best to prevent flare-ups and treat them quickly when they occur.

### Stay Healthy to Avoid Flare-ups

- ☐ Take care of yourself and try to avoid cold, flu and other infectious diseases.
- ☐ Take all your medications as directed.
- ☐ Eat right.
- ☐ Get enough sleep.
- ☐ Exercise.
- ☐ Stay away from people who are sick.
- ☐ Get your flu shot, and ask about getting a pneumonia shot.
- ☐ Wash your hands properly and often.
- ☐ Follow your COPD Action Plan.

### Recognize the Early Warning Signs of a Flare-up

You can often tell when a flare-up is about to begin. Pay attention. If you catch it in time, it can be easier to treat and you may not have to go to the hospital.

Watch for symptoms that last longer than 48 hours:

- more fatigue or shortness of breath than usual
- more coughing than usual
- a change in colour of your mucus – can be yellow, green, or brown mucus
- an increase in the amount, thickness or stickiness of the mucus
- a fever, sore throat or cold symptoms
- swollen ankles
- need to sleep sitting up instead of lying down
- feeling unusually sick or unwell

## Start Treating a Flare-up Quickly

COPD flare-ups can begin suddenly and unexpectedly. That is why you must know and follow your COPD action plan promptly. It might involve keeping a supply of antibiotics or corticosteroid pills along with instructions from your doctor on how to use them. If your doctor tells you to start taking antibiotics or corticosteroids at the first sign of a cold or infection, do not wait. Treating your flare-up quickly can reduce your chances of getting seriously ill and prevent further damage to your lungs. If you do not have an action plan and have these symptoms, do not delay in seeing a doctor.

More serious warning signs include **chest pain, blue lips or fingers, and confusion**. If you have these signs, call 911 immediately or ask someone to take you to the nearest emergency department. Do not drive yourself.

### When to Call the Doctor or Go to the Emergency Department

Follow your COPD action plan. Some flare-ups will be minor, but others can be very serious. If you are having a flare-up and your medications are not working or you are getting worse, call your doctor or go to the nearest emergency department.

### Know Your Medications

If you do have to go to the hospital, you will be asked what medications you are taking. It is a good idea to always have an up-to-date list of all your medications (including how much you take and how often).

### At the Hospital

You will be given medicine to open your airways so you can breathe easier. Your pulse, temperature and blood pressure will be taken.

The amount of oxygen in your blood will be measured and you may be given oxygen (with or without a mask). You may also be given an anti-inflammatory medication to decrease swelling in your airways or an antibiotic if your flare-up is due to a bacterial lung infection.

## Before You Go Home

Make sure you understand any changes that have been made to your medication. This can mean different doses of your current medications or new prescriptions. You should know how long to keep taking each medicine and when you should lower the dose or stop taking them.

**If the staff at the hospital think it will take more than a few days for your emergency department record to reach your doctor, it might be a good idea to ask for a copy to take home with you.**



## After the Hospital Visit

Within two to three days of leaving the hospital, call your doctor for an appointment so you can talk about why you ended up in the emergency department and how to prevent it from happening again. Let your doctor know about changes to your medications that were made at the hospital.

Finding a Certified Respiratory Educator who can help you manage your COPD as part of your healthcare team is essential.

**Remember to take care of yourself every day, not just when you are feeling unwell.**

## Shortness of Breath

Breathlessness – or shortness of breath – is very common for people with COPD. Some people feel breathless most of the time, while others are short of breath only when walking or exercising. Good nutrition, enough sleep, anxiety control, regular physical activity and healthy environment can limit your breathlessness.

Being short of breath can be scary but there are some things you can do to make it easier. Some items that may help you relieve shortness of breath include walking aids and learning breathing exercises. Some people find using a fan in front of their face helps relieve symptoms of shortness of breath.

Below are types of breathing that can help you. Please speak with your healthcare provider to see if they are right for you. It is also a good idea to practice these types of breathing exercises with your respiratory educator to make sure you are doing them properly.

### Pursed-lip Breathing

This type of breathing helps to let out stale air and slow down your breathing. As you practice, try to exhale (breathe out) twice as long as you inhale (breathe in).

1. With your mouth closed, breathe in a normal amount of air through your nose.
2. Purse your mouth as if you are whistling.
3. Keeping your lips pursed, slowly blow the air out through your mouth.



*Inhale*

*Exhale*



## Diaphragmatic Breathing

The diaphragm is the main breathing muscle. If you know how to control this muscle well, it can help you with breathlessness. It is not hard.

1. Relax your shoulders and sit comfortably in an easy chair.
2. Place your hands lightly on your stomach.
3. Breathe in slowly through your nose. Your stomach should rise under your hands.
4. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips. Your stomach should fall.



*Inhale*

*Exhale*

## Controlling Your Breathing

Feeling short of breath can make you panic and breathe faster than normal. This can send your breathing out of control. In addition to pursed lip breathing, here are some tips you can use to control your breathing if you feel shortness of breath coming on:

- Stop and rest comfortably.
- Breathe through your mouth.
- Breathe in and blow out as fast as necessary.
- Begin to blow out longer. (Used pursed lip method if it works for you.)
- Slow down your breathing.
- Begin to use your nose when breathing in.
- Once your breathing is under control, try diaphragmatic breathing.

When you feel better, stay in the resting position and continue pursed-lip breathing for five minutes or until you feel back to normal.

## Proper Positioning

Positioning your body properly can help reduce breathlessness as well. Poor posture can make it difficult to breathe. Keeping your back straight will help.

### Sitting

1. Place both feet on the ground.
2. Lean head and shoulders forward slightly.
3. Rest your arms on your knees.
4. Keep your arms relaxed.

### Standing

1. Lean your back against a wall, chair or counter.
2. Place your feet slightly apart.
3. Relax and lean your head and shoulders forward slightly.
4. Rest your hands lightly on your thighs or a piece of furniture.

## Budget Your Energy

Pace and plan your tasks so you can conserve energy wherever you can. These can be simple changes to your routine like limiting the number of times you need to walk upstairs or sitting down while preparing supper.

## Ease Anxiety

Emotional stress can cause you to feel breathless. Here are some ideas for coping with anxiety to get your breathlessness under control.

- Think ahead and try to avoid situations that cause you stress.
- Make plans for situations you cannot avoid. For example, this can mean arranging for a wheelchair if you are flying somewhere.
- If you start feeling anxious, sit down, relax and practice pursed-lip breathing.
- Talk to your friends and family about what makes you anxious. If they know, they can help you.
- Consider therapy for your anxiety.
- Relax and try to remember that not everything needs to be done in one day.