

# Learn More Breathe Better

*This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

Do you suffer from a chronic cough, hack, or wheeze? Do you struggle for air? Are you frequently short of breath when gardening, grocery shopping, or climbing stairs? If so, your lungs could be trying to tell you something. You could be one of the 24 million Americans who suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD.

I'm Letitia Presley-Cantrell, a behavioral scientist at the CDC. COPD, also referred to as emphysema or chronic bronchitis, is a serious lung disease that makes it hard to breathe. Unfortunately, half of those who suffer from COPD remain undiagnosed.

COPD develops slowly and can worsen over time. The symptoms are often dismissed as a normal consequence of aging or being out of shape.

Before you can understand COPD, you need to know how your lungs work. Airways carry air in and out of the lungs. Healthy airways and air sacs in the lungs are elastic—they bounce back to their original shape after being filled with air and stretched, just the way a new rubber band or balloon does. This elastic quality helps retain the normal structure of the lung and helps move the air quickly in and out. In people with COPD, the air sacs no longer bounce back to their original shape. The airways can also become swollen and mucus production might increase, making it even harder to get air in and out of the lungs.

Symptoms of COPD typically include:

- Constant coughing,
- Shortness of breath while doing normal daily activities,
- Excess mucus production,
- Feeling like you can't breathe,
- Not being able to take a deep breath, and
- Wheezing.

When COPD is severe, shortness of breath and other symptoms get in the way of doing even the most basic activities, such as light housework, taking a walk, even bathing and getting dressed. If you experience any of these symptoms and are a current or former smoker, you are especially at risk for COPD. While smoking is one of the most common risk factors, it's not the only one. In fact, one in six people with COPD have never smoked. If you have worked or lived around dust, chemicals, fumes, or other things that can irritate the lungs, you could be at risk. There are also genetic conditions that can cause COPD.

The risk for COPD increases with age and occurs most often in people over 40. If you are at risk for COPD and have a constant cough, excess mucus production, shortness of breath, or wheezing, you should be tested for the disease.

The test is called spirometry and can detect COPD early, before it becomes severe. It's a simple breathing test that measures how *much* air you can blow out of your lungs and how *fast* you can

blow it out. Based on this test, your doctor can tell if you have COPD, how severe it is, and the best course of treatment.

There is no cure for COPD, but it can be treated. Early diagnosis and treatment is the best way to help slow the progression of the disease.

If you have any symptoms of COPD, your lungs may be trying to tell you something and the time to listen is now. Take the first step to breathing better by learning more about COPD today.

For more information, please visit [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) and type *COPD* in the search box, or visit the *COPD Learn More Breathe Better*<sup>®</sup> Campaign, at [COPD.nhlbi.nih.gov](http://COPD.nhlbi.nih.gov).