

COPD: How to Create an Exacerbation Plan

Overview

If you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), your symptoms may get worse over a short time and stay bad. This is called an exacerbation (say "egg-ZASS-er-BAY-shun") or flare-up. Your shortness of breath, cough, or mucus may get worse.

Many irritants or triggers can cause a flare-up. Common triggers are respiratory infections such as colds, the flu, and pneumonia. Other triggers include indoor and outdoor air pollution such as smoke, fumes, and soot.

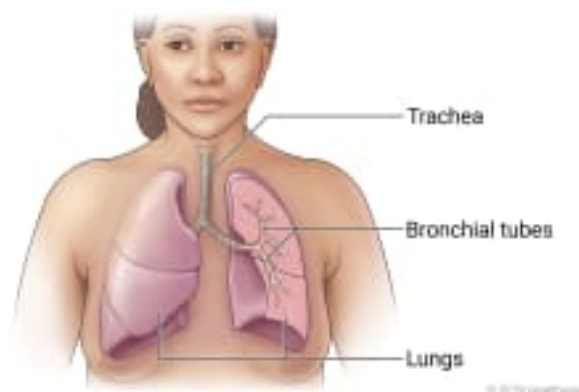
Work with your doctor to make a plan for dealing with a flare-up. You can better manage it if you plan ahead.

Make a plan with your doctor

Work with your doctor to make a plan for dealing with an exacerbation. If you are prepared, you may be able to get it under control. **Do not panic** if you start to have one. Quick treatment at home may help you prevent serious breathing problems.

Take your medicines exactly as prescribed

- First, use your quick-relief inhaler. If your symptoms do not get better after you use your medicine, call your doctor or seek immediate medical care. Call an ambulance if needed.
- Use your inhaler or nebulizer correctly. Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or respiratory therapist how to use each of your inhalers or nebulizers.
- If your doctor has given you steroid pills, take them as directed.



- Your doctor may give you a prescription for an antibiotic, which you can fill if you need it.

Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

Help prevent an exacerbation

Staying as healthy as possible may help you avoid an exacerbation.

- If you smoke, try to quit. If you can't quit, cut back as much as you can. Quitting is the most important step you can take to prevent more damage to your lungs and prevent problems. If you smoke, it is never too late to stop. If you need help quitting, talk to your doctor about stop-smoking programs and medicines. These may increase your chances of quitting for good.
- Take your daily medicines as prescribed.
- Try to avoid infections such as COVID-19, colds, and the flu. Wash your hands often. You may also want to wear a mask when you go to public indoor places. Try to avoid sick people.

- Stay up to date on vaccines. This includes getting a flu vaccine every year. Encourage those you live with to also stay up to date on vaccines. Then they can avoid getting sick and infecting you.
- Try to avoid things that could make your symptoms worse. These include secondhand smoke, chemical fumes, factory dust, soot, and air pollution. Talk to your doctor about ways to protect yourself if you are exposed to substances that irritate your lungs at home, outside, or at work.

Learn breathing techniques

You may find that you take quick, small, shallow breaths when you have COPD. Learning to relax with breathing techniques may help you deal with an exacerbation. Try practicing two exercises, pursed-lip breathing and diaphragmatic breathing (belly breathing), 3 or 4 times a day. Plan to do each exercise for about 10 minutes. As you get more comfortable doing these breathing exercises, you can also do them to feel better when you are short of breath.

- **Pursed-lip breathing** helps you breathe more air out so that your next breath can be deeper. Pursed-lip breathing can relieve shortness of breath and help you be able to move around. Think of it as "smell the flowers (inhale) and blow out the candle (exhale)."
 - Breathe in through your nose for about 2 seconds.
 - Breathe out through your mouth while almost closing your lips for 4 to 6 seconds. Note that exhaling is longer than inhaling.
- **Belly breathing** helps your lungs expand so that they take in more air. It also helps strengthen your diaphragm. Your diaphragm is a large muscle that separates your lungs from your belly. It helps draw air into your lungs as you breathe.

- Lie on your back, or prop yourself up on several pillows. You can also sit in a chair.
- Put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest. Breathe in through your nose. Let your breath push your belly out as far as possible. You should feel the hand on your belly move out while the hand on your chest does not move.
- Breathe out through pursed lips. You should feel the hand on your belly move in.
- When you can do this type of breathing well while lying down or leaning on pillows, learn to do it while sitting or standing.

Breathing while bending forward at the waist may make breathing easier. It can reduce shortness of breath. It helps the diaphragm move more easily. Make sure to hold on to something sturdy, like a countertop or chair, if you're standing.

When should you call for help?

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You have severe trouble breathing.
- You have severe chest pain.

Call your doctor now or seek immediate medical care if:

- You have new or worse shortness of breath.
- You have new or worse chest pain.
- You cough up blood.
- You have a fever.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You are coughing more deeply or more often, especially if you notice more mucus or a change in the color of your mucus.

- You have new or increased swelling in your legs or belly.
- You have feelings of anxiety or depression.
- You need to use your antibiotic or steroid pills.
- You are not getting better as expected.



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