

COPD - Emphysema

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a general term for a group of diseases that cause progressive damage to your lungs. These diseases include chronic bronchitis, asthma and emphysema. Unlike asthma, which occurs when the muscles in your airways tighten, emphysema causes a loss of elasticity in the walls of the small air sacs in your lungs. Eventually, the walls stretch and break, creating larger, less efficient air sacs that aren't able to handle the normal exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

When emphysema is advanced, you must work so hard to expel air from your lungs that breathing can consume up to 20 percent of your resting energy. Unfortunately, because emphysema develops gradually over many years, you may not experience symptoms such as shortness of breath until irreversible damage has already occurred. Treatments focus on relieving symptoms and avoiding complications.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

The main symptoms of emphysema are shortness of breath and a reduced capacity for physical activity, both of which are likely to become worse as the disease progresses. In time, you may have trouble breathing even when lying down, and it may be especially hard to breathe during and after respiratory infections, such as colds or the flu. Other signs and symptoms of emphysema include:

- **Chronic, mild cough.** You may produce sputum or phlegm when you cough.
- **Loss of appetite and weight loss.** It's a vicious cycle. Emphysema can make eating more difficult, and the act of eating can rob you of your breath. The result is that you simply may not feel like eating much of the time.
- **Fatigue.** You're likely to feel tired both because it's more difficult to breathe and because your body is getting less oxygen.

PREVENTION



Most cases of emphysema are due to smoking. If you smoke — cigarettes, cigars or a pipe — your chance of developing emphysema is much greater than for nonsmokers. The best way to prevent emphysema is to not smoke or to stop smoking. In addition, try to limit your exposure to secondhand smoke.

Although smoking is the most common cause of emphysema, occupational exposure to chemical fumes and dust also is a risk factor. Try wearing a dust mask for protection if you work in such an environment.

WHEN TO SEEK MEDICAL ADVICE

See your doctor if any of the following apply to you:

- You feel short of breath most of the time.
- You can't breathe well enough to tolerate even moderate exercise.
- You frequently cough up sputum that's colored and possibly infected.

These signs and symptoms don't necessarily mean you have emphysema, but they do indicate that your lungs aren't working properly and should be evaluated by your doctor as soon as possible

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