

What is COPD?

(Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ

COPD stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. Some people call it CORD (Chronic Obstruction Respiratory Disease). COPD is a general term for chronic (long-term) breathing problems caused by conditions such as chronic bronchitis, chronic asthma and emphysema. It means the airways in your lungs are obstructed and your lung tissue may be damaged. This causes difficulty breathing.

How serious is it?

COPD is a serious issue. The condition can have a significant effect on quality of life, and although symptoms can be managed, there is no cure.

In New Zealand COPD is ranked 2nd in men and 5th in women with regards to its impact upon the health of New Zealanders. It is the 4th leading cause of death after cancer, heart disease and stroke and is among the top four major causes of avoidable hospitalisation for New Zealanders aged 45 and over. It is estimated to cost up to \$192m in health costs each year. New Zealand currently has the 5th highest health impact for COPD in the world.

How do I get COPD?

The main cause of COPD in New Zealand is tobacco smoking — over 15% of all smokers are likely to be affected by COPD. A small proportion of people develop COPD for other reasons for example exposure to dust at work or an inherited alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency. For further information on alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency see the fact sheet “Alpha-1-antitrypsin and lung disease” or visit our website www.asthmafoundation.org.nz

How do I know that I have COPD?

Unfortunately, someone who has COPD may have no symptoms until the disease is quite advanced. The symptoms are usually shortness of breath when exercising, cough with phlegm, and frequent bouts of bronchitis in the winter. These symptoms may seem minor at first but can progress to the point where walking short distances, getting dressed and even eating can cause you extreme shortness of breath.

How is COPD diagnosed?

COPD can be diagnosed with a simple lung function test, known as spirometry. This measures how quickly you can blow air out of your lungs. You will be asked to blow into the Spirometer machine for as long and hard as you can. Put simply, the more obstructed your airways, the longer it takes to blow the air out.

Tests are available in most areas on referral from a GP, either at public hospitals free of charge, at larger medical centres or private laboratories where a charge may apply.

For further information on spirometry see the fact sheet “What is Spirometry?” or visit our website asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

How is COPD treated?

Early diagnosis is crucial. The condition must be diagnosed before symptoms start in order to minimise the progression of the disease. If you're a smoker, ask your doctor about having a spirometry test. We recommend that people who smoke or have smoked have regular spirometry tests from the age of 40 years.

Quit smoking. Stopping smoking reduces the risk of developing COPD and slows down its progression. No matter how old you are or how long you have been smoking stopping smoking stops the further progression of COPD.

Pulmonary Rehabilitation (rehab). A programme of education and exercise that usually runs for at least 6 weeks. Ask your doctor if there is a Pulmonary Rehab course in your area.

Medication. Inhaled medications are available to help with COPD symptoms.

Vaccination. Vaccination against influenza will reduce the risk of COPD flare ups or exacerbations and avoid a hospitalisation. Every year the 'flu' vaccination is free between the months of March to June for people with COPD.

How is COPD different from asthma?

Some of the symptoms of asthma and COPD are similar (for example, being short of breath or coughing). However, they are two quite separate conditions requiring different treatment and management. One key difference between them is that asthma is reversible – that is, the airways of a person with asthma can go back to normal. COPD, on the other hand, is non-reversible – the goal of treatment is to prevent further damage and manage symptoms.

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ can help you

The Asthma and Respiratory Foundation NZ is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

For further information on COPD, visit goldcopd.com or lungfoundation.com.