

COPD Exacerbation – Guide for Patients

A COPD flare up is the worsening of your COPD symptoms. They can begin suddenly and unexpectedly. Everyone experiences exacerbations differently, but it may take around 30 days to return to your usual health. If you have pneumonia, you may have symptoms for about 6 weeks.

| Call 911 or have someone take you to the nearest Emergency Department if... | Call your family medicine team if... |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• You have severe trouble breathing• You have chest pain• You have blue lips or fingers• Your pulse oximeter readings are going down even with treatment• You feel confused, disoriented, or have trouble speaking in full sentences | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your symptoms are worse than usual (coughing, wheezing, shortness of breath)• The colour, thickness, or amount of mucus changes• You feel more tired than usual for more than one day• You have new swelling in your legs or ankles• You have more trouble sleeping than usual• You feel the need to increase your oxygen levels (if you are on oxygen)• Your oxygen levels are lower than usual (if you measure your oxygen levels) |

Monitoring your Illness

Your family medicine team will monitor you regularly. It is helpful if you record your symptoms (including whether they are better or worse), and any information such as pulse oximeter readings, temperature, pulse, and breathing rate to discuss with your healthcare provider.

If you use a pulse oximeter to measure the oxygen levels in your blood, here are some instructions that may be helpful:

How to use a pulse oximeter: [Information Sheet](#) & [Video](#)

If you do not have a pulse oximeter, your family medicine team may have one available to lend you.

Breathing Techniques

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.

Adapted from "A COPD Handbook" by the Lung Association, [available here](#).

When you are short of breath, you need to relax and control your breathing. Breathlessness in itself is not harmful. Don't avoid becoming short of breath on the assumption that it is bad for you.

Should you become **S**hort **O**f **B**reath, try to follow these steps:

- 1 . Keep calm, relax your neck and shoulders.
2. Remove yourself from the area if there is a trigger (i.e. cat, strong order, smoke, etc).
3. Stop and rest in a comfortable position (see below).
4. TRY not to gasp for air.
5. Breathe in slowly through your nose.
6. Purse your lips, breathe out slowly, like whistling.
7. Breathe out twice as long as you breathe in.
8. Once you have regained control of your breathing, continue with your activity.

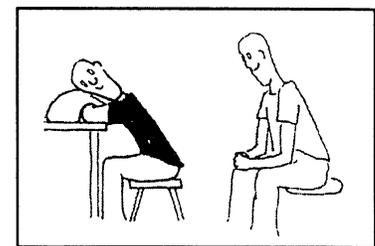
Pace yourself, but don't limit your activity.

Remember:

Being **S**hort **O**f **B**reath, on effort, is uncomfortable but not in itself harmful or dangerous. Practicing the following positions with breathing control will help you stay more comfortable when you do get short of breath. The fear of breathlessness is what you need to control. Knowing what activities cause breathlessness and using your pursed-lip breathing help keep you from overacting when it happens.

Relaxed Sitting

Lean forward resting forearms on thighs with wrists and shoulders relaxed, allowing for free movement of the diaphragm. Lean forward onto table while sitting.



Leaning

Spread arms apart, resting on forearm over the surface, on a counter top, windowsill, bar, etc. Relax your shoulders. Stand with one leg slightly forward, bent at the knee.

