



Spotlight On Disability

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) refers to two separate lung diseases that frequently are experienced by the same person, according to the American Lung Association. These two diseases are chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

Both chronic bronchitis and emphysema are caused by obstructions to the flow of air that interferes with the breathing process. Chronic bronchitis leads to scarred and inflamed lining of the bronchial tubes. Less air is able to flow to and from the lungs due to the inflammation and scarring. Persons with chronic bronchitis cough up a heavy mucus, or phlegm, most days of the month. Other symptoms include chronic cough, frequent clearing of the throat, and shortness of breath.

Emphysema gets its start in the alveoli, or air sacs, in the lungs. The alveoli are where the oxygen from the air is exchanged for carbon dioxide in the blood. When someone has emphysema, these alveoli become damaged and the lungs are not able to transfer oxygen to the bloodstream. This leads to shortness of breath, and patients with emphysema generally have great difficulty exhaling.

COPD is the fourth leading cause of death in America. The American Lung Association states that the primary risk factor for dying of COPD is smoking. Between 80 and 90 percent of COPD deaths are caused by smoking.

Other causes of COPD include secondhand smoke, air pollution, heredity, and a history of childhood respiratory infections. Exposure to certain industrial pollutants has been found to increase one's odds of getting COPD.

COPD cannot be cured, and generally leads to long-term decline in lung function. Doctors prescribe medication to treat the symptoms, not to make the disease go away. These can include medications that open the air passages in the lungs, antibiotics, oxygen, and breathing treatments. Persons with COPD should always receive vaccinations for influenza and pneumonia, and they should avoid cigarette smoke and other pollutants. Your doctor might want you to have pulmonary rehabilitation, which will help you cope not only physically, but also socially and psychologically, with COPD.

The American Lung Association has a number of helpful hints for persons suffering from COPD. A few of these include: pacing yourself and taking time to rest, stretching exercises before you get out of bed, using a shower chair so you can sit in the shower instead of trying to stand, not using aerosols or sprays that have not been prescribed by a physician, wearing clothes that do not restrict your chest or abdomen, and never using anyone else's medications.

If you would like more information about COPD or about your specific disability, contact your Independent Living Specialist. He or she would be happy to help you find ways to deal with your specific situation!