

# FEELING *breathless?*

**I seem to be breathless compared with my friends. How do I know if this is because of COPD?**

*The truth is, you don't!  
That's why it's important to see your doctor, so that the reason for your breathlessness can be determined.*

*If you currently smoke or have been a smoker in the past and are experiencing breathlessness, it is possible that you have COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease).*

*COPD is a serious lung disease that makes it harder to breathe as time goes on. In the UK the prevalence of COPD has been estimated at 1%, rising to 5% in men aged 65-77 years, and 10% in men over 75 years.<sup>1</sup>*

*COPD can be confirmed by a breathing test from your doctor.*

*If you are more breathless than your friends, you should try to find out why.*





## What happens with COPD?

*As COPD develops, people find it increasingly difficult to get about without becoming extremely short of breath. Severe sufferers can eventually become housebound or hospitalised.<sup>1</sup>*

*Even simple, everyday activities become difficult for people with COPD: climbing the stairs, going shopping, playing with children or trying to walk at the same pace as their family and friends.<sup>2</sup>*

## What are the symptoms of COPD?

*The main symptoms include:<sup>2</sup>*

- breathlessness*
- persistent cough*
- wheezing*
- increased sputum or phlegm production*

*People often confuse their symptoms with getting older, being 'out of shape', or with the fact that they smoke. However, breathlessness is a sign that the lungs are not working properly. Many people live with breathlessness and don't realise something can be done to help them feel better.*



## What causes COPD?

*Smoking is the most common cause of COPD, which damages the lungs.<sup>1</sup> In people with COPD the airways become obstructed, making it hard for air to get in and out. Once you give up smoking, you gradually reduce your chances of getting COPD – or slow down the speed at which the disease progresses if you already have it.<sup>2</sup>*

## Can COPD be treated?

*Unfortunately there is currently no cure for COPD, but effective treatments are available which can help reduce breathlessness and improve sufferers' quality of life.*

## The importance of early diagnosis and treatment

*COPD is a disease that gradually gets worse over time, and the earlier it is diagnosed, the earlier treatment can begin. However, the best way to help improve your breathing is to give up smoking. Your Doctor can provide you with information and support to help you do this. They can also provide you with treatment that may prevent the complications and the worsening of symptoms associated with the condition. Diagnosis of COPD is based on the symptoms described earlier, and an assessment of risk factors such as smoking. Your doctor may test your lung function using an instrument called a spirometer, to confirm whether or not you have COPD.<sup>2</sup>*



## Do I have COPD?

*The earlier COPD is diagnosed, the more effective treatment can be. Answering the following questions can help you decide if you need to talk to your doctor. If the answer to some or all of these questions is 'yes' it is important to speak to your doctor.*

- Are you over 35?
- Do you smoke or have you smoked in the past?
- When you climb the stairs do you experience severe shortness of breath?
- Do you have a persistent cough that has lasted for longer than a month?
- Have you experienced an increase in phlegm production, or has your phlegm become thicker or changed colour?
- Have you been exposed to coal dust or any other similar type of air pollution at work?
- Do you have problems sleeping? Perhaps you sleep better when sitting up?
- Have you lost or gained weight for no apparent reason?
- Are you finding that you are more tired and more lacking in energy than usual?

1. Britton M. The burden of COPD in the U.K.: results from the Confronting COPD survey. *Respir Med* 2003; Suppl C:S71-S79.

2. NICE Clinical Guideline. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - management of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in adults in primary and secondary care. Preface and introduction. 2004. Available at [http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG012\\_niceguideline.pdf](http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG012_niceguideline.pdf) Last accessed 07.05.09.