

COPD Backgrounder

What is COPD?

COPD stands for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, the new name for chronic bronchitis and emphysema. COPD is a long-term lung disease often caused by smoking. COPD slowly damages your airways, the breathing tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs. COPD makes airways swollen and partly blocked by mucus. It also damages the tiny air sacs at the end of your airways. This makes it hard to move air in and out of your lungs. There is no cure for COPD but there are good treatments.

Key messages:

- All smokers and ex-smokers over 40 years of age should take the [Canadian Lung Health Test](#) to find out if they are at risk for COPD.
- If you think you may be at risk for COPD, see your doctor and ask about getting spirometry, a simple breathing test that measures how much air you can forcefully move in and out of your lungs.
- The main symptoms of COPD are shortness of breath and having a hard time doing regular activities, such as walking.
- COPD is treatable. Early treatment can slow the decline in lung function and improve quality of life.
- Quitting smoking is one of the best ways to prevent COPD. The Canadian Lung Association says it's never too late to quit.
- It's important that people who have or who are at risk for COPD be informed about this serious lung disease. The Canadian Lung Association is here to help those who may be affected by COPD. Visit lung.ca/copd or call the COPD Helpline at 1-866-717-COPD (2673) for more information. In Quebec, call 1-888-POUMON-9

COPD Fast Facts

- COPD is Canada's fourth leading cause of death.¹
- One out of every four people aged 35 and older are likely to develop COPD during their lifetime, according to a recent Canadian study published in the British medical journal, *The Lancet*.² The findings suggest that people are at much greater risk of developing COPD than congestive heart failure, acute heart attack, and several common cancers.
- The average 35-year-old woman is more than three times as likely to get COPD than breast cancer during her lifetime, and the average 35-year-old man is at more than three times greater risk of developing COPD than prostate cancer.³
- About 80 per cent of cases are caused by smoking.
- Other risk factors include long-term exposure to air pollution, chronic dust in the workplace, having repeated lung infections as a child, and a rare genetic condition called alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency.
- COPD is a major cause for hospital stays and emergency room visits across Canada.⁴
- Reducing flare-ups (exacerbations) of the disease can go a long way to reducing hospitalizations.⁵

¹ O'Donnell D. E, Aaron S, Boubeau J et al Canadian Thoracic Society recommendations for management of COPD – 2007 update Can Resp J, 2007; 14(Suppl B) 5B-32B
http://www.respiratoryguidelines.ca/sites/all/files/CTS_COPD_Guidelines_2007_Update.pdf

² Dr Andrea S Gershon et al., The Lancet, Volume 378, Issue 9795, Pages 991 - 996, 10 September 2011 <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2811%2960990-2/abstract>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Canadian Thoracic Society, The Human and Economic Burden of COPD: A leading cause of hospital admission in Canada http://www.lung.ca/cts-sct/pdf/COPDReport_E.pdf

⁵ Ibid.