

COPD

Flare-ups: What to do

A COPD flare-up happens when COPD symptoms get worse, or when new symptoms develop. Flare-ups are also called exacerbations.

Flare-ups are one of the biggest reasons why people with COPD become disabled or have to be hospitalized. They can be deadly.

To manage your COPD, you need to know: [how to prevent flare-ups](#), warning signs and symptoms of a flare up, and what you should do if you have a flare-up and when to seek emergency help.

How to prevent COPD flare-ups

Take good care of yourself. Eat healthy foods, exercise regularly, get enough sleep. Staying healthy will help your body fight infections.

Wash your hands properly and often, to reduce your chance of picking up germs and getting sick. [This page](#) explains all the steps of proper handwashing, and includes drawings of each step.

Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Many people catch colds, flu, and other contagious respiratory (lung) infections by touching their face. They don't realize that there are germs on their hands that can make them sick.

Stay away from people who are sick.

Take all of the [medications](#) prescribed by your doctor. Ask for help if you have questions about how or when to take medications or what they're for.

Ask your doctor for a personalized written COPD action plan. A COPD action plan gives written instructions from your doctor on what to do when your symptoms flare up. Your COPD action plan will tell you what extra medicine to take, when to call the doctor, and when to go to the emergency department. [Here is a blank COPD action plan \(PDF\)](#) that you can fill out with your doctor.

Get your [flu shot](#) every year. Ask your doctor if you need a [pneumonia shot](#).

Avoid [triggers](#) that can make COPD worse, like air pollution, cigarette smoke and breathing very cold or very humid air.

Warning signs and symptoms of a COPD flare-up, and what to do

- an unusual increase in shortness of breath
- mucus (phlegm) that is more yellow, green or brown than usual
- an increase in the amount, thickness or stickiness of your mucus (phlegm)

- fever
- symptoms of a cold, such as a head ache, runny nose, or sore throat
- swollen ankles
- feeling tired and generally unwell

What to do if you have these symptoms: If you notice any of these symptoms, follow the advice in your written COPD action plan. If you don't know what to do or if your symptoms are getting worse, call your doctor. If you can't reach your doctor, go to the hospital emergency department.

Warning signs of a severe COPD flare-up: call 911 if you have these signs

- chest pain
- blue lips or fingers
- confusion, can't think clearly, or very agitated (upset)
- drowsy
- very short of breath

Treatment for a COPD flare-up

It's very important that you treat your COPD flare-up as early as possible. If you treat a flare-up early, you are less likely to need hospital care.

To treat a flare-up, follow the advice above and the instructions in your action plan. There are medications to treat COPD flare-ups: [learn more](#).

COPD triggers

Triggers are things that can irritate your lungs and make your COPD symptoms worse. Avoid these common triggers:

- Air pollution, smog
- Second-hand smoke
- Strong fumes, perfume, scented products
- Cold air
- Hot and humid air

How to avoid COPD triggers indoors

Avoid breathing in the fumes from perfume, paints and cleaning products. Try to buy household products that are unscented. When cooking, turn on your kitchen fan, which should be vented outdoors. Avoid smoke from fireplaces or woodstoves. Avoid second-hand smoke anywhere: in homes, in cars, in restaurants.

How to avoid COPD triggers outdoors

If cold air and strong winds bother you, try covering your nose and mouth with a scarf (wrapped loosely) and breathe through your nose. The scarf will help warm the air before it gets to your lungs. On hot humid days, or days of smog, stay indoors in a clean air-conditioned room.

Things that trigger COPD are often the same things that trigger asthma. In the asthma section, you can read more about triggers and how to avoid them.