

Thursday, 17 October 2024

Helping patients to breathe easier after a COPD diagnosis

Each year in Australia, more than 7,600 people die from the chronic lung condition **chronic obstructive pulmonary disease** (COPD), and it is associated with the deaths of another 9,600 people.ⁱ

This serious and debilitating lung condition is not reversible and reduces airflow, causing breathing difficulties that can severely limit everyday activities and have a significant impact on quality of life.

However, getting an early and accurate diagnosis, and taking steps to manage symptoms, can enable people to have a better quality of life and improve their health outcomes.

Shortness of breath, a persistent cough, chest tightness and wheezing are all signs and symptoms of COPD, especially for people aged over 35 years. It is estimated that one in 13 Australians over the age of 40 live with the disease, although half of them do not know they have it.ⁱ

Released today, Australia's first [Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease Clinical Care Standard](#) describes best practice care to better support people with the condition, in both community settings and hospitals.

The [Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care](#), which leads improvements in the safety and quality of health care, developed the Standard to encourage better assessment for people with COPD, prevent flare-ups (where symptoms worsen), reduce hospitalisations and improve health outcomes.

Q+A

What is COPD?

COPD is a common lung condition characterised by chronic airflow limitation that results in shortness of breath and makes it difficult to breathe. It is most often caused by abnormalities in the lungs, which usually includes inflammation of the airways and damage of the small air sacs (alveoli).

While symptoms can be improved with treatment, there is no cure for COPD.

What is the impact of COPD?

Over time, COPD can have a significant impact on people's ability to carry out everyday activities and their quality of life. Many people with COPD also experience flare-ups, a sudden worsening of their symptoms, which can be life-threatening and require hospitalisation and treatment with oxygen.

These exacerbations can often be avoided with best practice management in the community.

What causes COPD?

The most common risk factor for COPD is current or past tobacco smoking, but people who have never smoked can also develop COPD. About one third of people with COPD have not previously smoked.

Other causes of COPD may include exposure to harmful chemicals, fumes or dust (especially at work), air pollution from using heating fuels indoors without proper ventilation, bushfire smoke, a history of childhood respiratory infections, and genetic factors.

How do people know if they have COPD?

A breathing test called ‘spirometry’ (breathing air into a machine called a spirometer) is the only way to accurately diagnose COPD. Accurate diagnosis is important because other conditions like asthma can cause similar respiratory symptoms to COPD but require different treatment.

Anybody with persistent symptoms (such as coughing, wheezing or shortness of breath) or risk factors should speak to their doctor.

How can we reduce COPD?

If a person with COPD currently smokes tobacco (including cigarettes or vapes), quitting is one of the most important ways to stop the condition from getting worse and improving their health. Healthcare providers know that quitting is hard and can help people find a way to quit.

Timely care can help people with COPD to avoid hospital admissions and improve their health outcomes.

What is the cost of COPD?

COPD is a major burden for people, their families and carers. It results in significant lost productivity, as many people with COPD are still in the prime of their working lives.

In Australia, the condition is a leading cause of potentially preventable hospitalisations and is associated with significant costs to the healthcare system. In 2020–2021, an estimated \$832 million was spent on COPD, representing 18% of the disease expenditure on respiratory conditions in Australia.¹

5 WAYS TO MANAGE COPD

People living with COPD who get the right treatment and actively manage their condition can reduce their symptoms and improve their quality of life.

COPD CARE	DESCRIPTION
1. Accurate diagnosis	Get an accurate diagnosis with a spirometry (breathing) test. This is essential for anyone with COPD symptoms to ensure they get the right treatment. COPD treatments are different to other respiratory conditions, such as asthma.
2. Quit smoking	People who smoke or vape tobacco should seek support to quit. This is one of the most effective ways to improve COPD symptoms and lung health.
3. Action plan	Get a COPD action plan from a healthcare provider, which explains what to do if symptoms worsen. Keep the action plan handy in case of a flare-up of symptoms.
4. Pulmonary rehab	Join a lung rehabilitation program to exercise safely, learn how to manage COPD symptoms including breathlessness, and avoid triggers that increase risk of a flare-up.
5. Manage medicines	Know how and when to use your prescribed medicines, and ask your healthcare provider to check that you are using your inhalers correctly.

Learn more at: safetyandquality.gov.au/copd-ccs

Media enquiries

Angela Jackson, Communications and Media Manager

M: 0407 213 522 | E: angela.jackson@safetyandquality.gov.au

¹ Toelle et al. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, [Respiratory symptoms and illness in older Australians: the Burden of Obstructive Lung Disease \(BOLD\) study](#), February 2013