

What is COPD?

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COPD or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is a lung disorder that makes it difficult to breathe. COPD affects over 3 million Americans every year and is the 3rd leading cause of death in the United States. COPD actually is the result of the occurrence of two lung diseases – chronic bronchitis and emphysema. Chronic bronchitis is a disease process which narrows the bronchial tubes which carry air into the lungs. Emphysema damages the air sacs in the lungs which, in turn, leads to getting less air into the lungs. Both conditions will combine to prevent the reduction of air into and out of the lungs, and the result will be shortness of breath. And, since lung damage cannot be undone, COPD, if not controlled, will worsen over time.

The number one cause of COPD is smoking which includes inhaling second-hand smoke. Because lung damage occurs after many years of exposure to smoke, most COPD patients are over 60 years old. In fact, several studies have shown that close to 50% of long-term smokers over 60 have COPD.

The primary symptom of COPD is a chronic, mucus-producing cough. Other symptoms include wheezing and shortness of breath which can worsen even with minor exertion. COPD is usually diagnosed through a physical exam which can include breathing tests, analysis of lung sounds, and x-rays and other imaging exams.

Since lung damage cannot be reversed in COPD sufferers, the primary aim of any treatment program is to control symptoms and minimize further damage. Thus, most treatment programs will include exercise regimens, diets, and the use of both oral steroids and inhalers. Most important, the COPD patient must quit smoking and avoid those conditions, such as smoky rooms and air pollution, which can irritate the lungs.

We at Tri-Community South EMS hope that anyone who has the symptoms of COPD that are outlined in this article will schedule an appointment with his or her family doctor as soon as possible. Also, remember, it is never too late to quit smoking. Your family doctor or PCP can also help you enroll in a smoking cessation program if you need help.