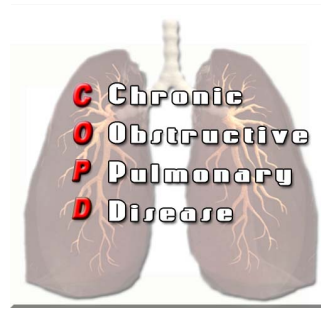


Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary



Title: COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) - what is it and what can I do about it?

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Plain Language Summary:

What is COPD?

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) is a disease that makes it hard for you to breathe and can cause you to cough, wheeze, tire easily, and stop you from being as active as you may like. Chronic bronchitis and emphysema are terms we sometimes use to describe the type of COPD that someone has. Normally, as we breathe air travels down and branches into each of the lungs. From there, it continues to branch further and further into the lungs, similar to the way a tree branches. At the end of each of these branches are small, balloon-like air sacs. The air sacs are important because they are where the lungs take oxygen from the air we breathe in and deliver it to our bodies.

In healthy people, both the airways and air sacs are elastic and are held open, which allows us to easily breathe air in and out. This is important because it allows air to pass through the branches and into and out of the air sacs. In people with COPD, the airways and air sacs lose their shape and become flattened, making it hard for you to deliver air to the air sacs. As a result, the body has a difficult time getting the oxygen it needs to work properly.

How did I get it?

Smoking is by far the most common cause of COPD. However, some people may get COPD from breathing things in the air such as second hand smoke, dust, chemical fumes, or air pollution.

Can it be cured?

Sadly, there is no cure for COPD because there is no way to undo the damage that has been done to your lungs. However, there are usually things we can do to make you more comfortable and allow you to enjoy your life to the fullest.

So what can I do?

If you are a smoker, the most important thing for you to do is to stop. If you have never smoked, you should figure out what is causing your COPD and avoid it. Talk to your doctor if you need help finding what caused your COPD.

There are several types of medications that doctors can use to help you deal with your COPD and make you more comfortable. As with all medications, you should talk to your doctor about the best treatment available for you.

1. Bronchodilators

- a. These usually come in an inhaler. They relax the muscles around your airways and make breathing easier.

2. **Inhaled steroids**

- a. Inhaled steroid medications can reduce “airway inflammation” and help you breathe easier. However, these drugs may have many side effects that you should talk to your doctor about.

3. **Antibiotics**

- a. Infections, such as bronchitis or pneumonia can make your COPD symptoms worse. Antibiotics can help fight these bacterial infections.

Other steps you can take include:

1. Regularly see your doctor
2. Avoid second-hand smoke
3. Drink plenty of water
4. Exercise
5. Eat healthy foods
6. Get vaccinated
7. Avoid crowds and cold air

Additional Resources:

For more information visit the following sites...

American Academy of Family Physicians:

<http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/asthma/lung/706.printerview.html>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute:

<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/copd/>

Patient Education Institute:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/copd/htm/index.htm>

For finding a support group visit...

<http://www.copd-support.com/>

Key Words:

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease

Emphysema

Chronic Bronchitis

Smoking Prevention

COPD Treatment

This document was created by a medical student enrolled in the Family Medicine Clerkship at the University of Minnesota Medical School as part of the course project. The aim of the project is to present information on a medical topic in the format of a patient education handout. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Minnesota Medical School physicians and faculty. These materials are provided for informational purposes only and are in no way intended to take the place of the advice and recommendations of your personal health care provider. The information provided may no longer be up-to-date since it has not been reviewed since the date of creation. The information provided should not be used to diagnose a health problem or disease, or as a means of determining treatment. In the event of a medical emergency, immediately contact a doctor or call 911.