

Health

Feeling breathless? Don't ignore it

The second leading cause of avoidable hospital admissions in Australia, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, or COPD, affects around one in seven people aged 40 years and over.

Amazingly, according to the Lung Foundation Australia, more than half of those affected live with the symptoms without knowing they have the condition.

COPD is an umbrella term for a group of progressive lung conditions including emphysema, chronic bronchitis and chronic asthma. The condition causes narrowing of the bronchial tubes in the lungs making it difficult to breathe. While a very small number of people have a genetic form of the condition, the vast majority contract COPD through environmental and lifestyle factors like smoking, including passive smoking, and working or living with dust, gas, chemical fumes, smoke or air pollution.

Melissa Wade, physiotherapist at Castlemaine Health, says the reason so many people with COPD go undiagnosed is that the symptoms tend to come on slowly and mildly. This means they are often mistaken as signs of ageing, a lack of fitness or other conditions like asthma. As COPD progresses these symptoms get stronger, making it harder to get on with normal life.

"Common symptoms include shortness of breath, a repetitive cough, increased phlegm or mucus, tiredness, more frequent chest infections and taking longer than normal to recover from colds or chest infections," says Melissa.

"In the early stages of COPD simple activities like walking up the hill towards home, or up the stairs at work may leave a person feeling breathless."

"A lot of people will put that down to getting

older, or being a bit out of shape. But it may actually be the early signs of a lung problem like COPD."

"What often happens then is that rather than seeking help people avoid the stairs or the hill. Then suddenly they're getting breathless walking on the flat. So they avoid walking altogether. Then taking a shower or making the bed makes them breathless. It becomes a downward spiral."

Castlemaine Health chronic disease program nurse, Ebony Coles agrees.

"We often have patients come to us saying their asthma puffers (inhalers) aren't working. That's because the symptoms they're experiencing aren't caused by asthma, it's COPD," says Ebony.

"One of the big concerns with COPD going undiagnosed is that it can worsen and become dangerous. It also means valuable treatment which could slow the progression of the disease is being missed. While there is currently no cure for COPD there are things that can help people live well and stay out of hospital.

"There's strong evidence to suggest that a pulmonary rehabilitation program can improve people's quality of life, reduce breathlessness and increase exercise capacity," says Melissa. Castlemaine Health's pulmonary rehabilitation program offers people with COPD education, support and a valuable connection with others in the community living with the condition.

During the eight week program patients learn how to manage their medication, exercise effectively and improve their fitness and strength, clear phlegm from their lungs and control their breathlessness.

CHRONIC OBSTRUCTIVE PULMONARY DISEASE

1 in 7 Australians over the age of 40 has COPD.¹

COPD is the **second leading cause** of avoidable hospital admissions.²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians have approximately **2.5 times the rate of COPD as other Australians.**³

Exacerbations or flare-ups of symptoms can occur in people with COPD. Frequent exacerbations of COPD can cause poor quality of life and a rapid decline in lung function.⁴

CAUSES

COPD can affect males and females of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. Causes can include:



Tobacco smoking



Passive smoking



Exposure to occupational or environmental pollutants (dust, gas or fumes)

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms for COPD tend to come on gradually over a couple of years and people who unknowingly have COPD may mistake their symptoms as signs of ageing, lack of fitness or asthma.



Shortness of breath



A repetitive cough



Phlegm or mucus

DIAGNOSIS



A spirometry test is needed to confirm the diagnosis of COPD.

SUPPORT

As COPD is a chronic condition, it is important that people take an active role in managing their condition. There are a range of treatment options, resources and support services available to help you live well with COPD. Contact Lung Foundation Australia for more information.

Adapted with permission from Lung Foundation Australia.

FIND OUT MORE
lungfoundation.com.au
or phone 1800 654 301.



"The program teaches really valuable skills but just being with other people who are breathless is one of the biggest things people say they get out of it," says Melissa. "Feeling less alone and sharing their experiences with others who really get it is so important."

A big part of the program also focuses on mental health.

"Anxiety is a huge factor," says Melissa. "When you're breathless, you're often anxious and the anxiety makes you more breathless which can be a horrible spiral. We work through some techniques to manage this using relaxation and mindfulness and can connect people to other services like counselling." Effective management of COPD also involves people understanding their triggers and having an action plan in place.

"For a person with COPD an illness can reduce lung function permanently so they need to know what to do as soon as they notice a symptom so they can nip it in the bud," says Ebony.

"For some people this might mean having antibiotics on hand so there's no waiting to see a GP, or feeling confident enough to contact their doctor and insist on an appointment."

"A respiratory specialist can work with patients to develop a plan that suits them and we can provide additional support along with their regular GP."

If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms or has been diagnosed with COPD and would like to find out more about the pulmonary rehabilitation program at Castlemaine Health, speak to your GP and arrange a referral.

Q&A

Q: How is COPD diagnosed?

A: A spirometry or lung function test is needed to confirm the diagnosis of COPD. The test involves blowing into a tube connected to a machine which measures how much air you can inhale, how much you can exhale and how quickly you can exhale. Your GP can refer you to a respiratory specialist who can conduct this test.

Q: What causes a COPD flare up?

A: If you have COPD knowing your triggers is really important. These can include high pollen counts combined with a certain type of thunderstorm, extremes in temperature, infections, cigarette smoke, smoke from wood fires and pollution.

Q: What can I do to manage COPD symptoms?

A: Make your life a smoke-free zone so quit smoking and/or reduce your exposure to second hand smoke. Keep up your immunisations for conditions such as influenza and pneumonia. Keep active and maintain a healthy diet. Attending a pulmonary rehabilitation program can also be a great help. Your GP or respiratory specialist will be able to help you develop a COPD action plan.



Castlemaine Health complex care nurse Ebony Coles and physiotherapist Melissa Wade.

For general information contact:
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