

Mid Cheshire Hospitals **NHS**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# What is an Exacerbation of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) and how to manage one



## **What is an exacerbation?**

An exacerbation (or flare up) of your COPD is a worsening of symptoms that requires changes to your treatment. Many people with COPD, especially in the winter, have times when they find it harder to breathe than normal. Often this is accompanied by a cough with yellow or green phlegm.

## **What causes an exacerbation?**

Many exacerbations are caused by an infection, although air pollution and changes in the weather can also cause them.

## **How do I recognise an exacerbation?**

### **The symptoms you experience may include:**

- Increase in coughing
- Changes in the amount, thickness and/or colour of your phlegm (sputum)
- Increase in breathlessness
- Chest tightness
- Wheezing
- Fever, night sweats

If 2 or more of these symptoms persist for 48 hours or more then you are probably experiencing an exacerbation/flare-up.

## **What do I do when I have an exacerbation?**

Whenever you have an exacerbation you should seek contact with your doctor or practice nurse. To help you get over your exacerbation:

- Your doctor may need to prescribe you some antibiotics and/or steroids.
- You may also need to take your reliever medication (puffers or nebulisers) more often to ease your breathing. You may need to continue this until your breathing becomes easier again.
- During this “flare-up” you must continue to drink plenty of fluids and eat little and often.

Balance activity with plenty of rests. Do as little as possible, but get out of bed wherever you can during the daytime. Sitting out in a chair is better for your recovery than lying in bed.

## **What if I need to go to hospital?**

If an ambulance is called for you or a doctor refers you to the hospital you are likely to be taken to the Accident & Emergency (A&E) Department.

Here you will be assessed by a doctor and depending on how much difficulty you have with your breathing you will be treated in A&E and sent home or you will be taken to a ward.

You are likely to get referred to the Supported Early Discharge Team. This is a team of health professionals specialised in caring for COPD patients. They may be able to support you further at home.

## **How long does an exacerbation last?**

Normally, patients make a full recovery within about a week/fortnight. Most people can be treated at home. On some occasions, if the exacerbation is particularly bad, a short stay in hospital may be needed.

## **How can I prevent an exacerbation happening?**

Most exacerbations are caused by infections. These infections are often picked up from people around you who have a “cough and a cold”. Some people have frequent flare-ups and others no more than anyone else without COPD. Most flare-ups happen during the colder seasons and therefore it is more likely you will get an exacerbation during the autumn or winter.

To help with prevention of flare-ups you could plan your activities to avoid the worst of the weather.

If you are at risk of having frequent flare-ups your GP might think you will benefit from keeping a spare course of antibiotics and steroid tablets at home in case of an exacerbation. If you are experiencing an exacerbation it is essential you recognise your symptoms and learn how to act accordingly. Your GP or practice nurse can advise you about this.

## **Flu Jab and Pneumonia Jab**

It is recommended that all patients with a chronic lung condition get both their flu jab and their pneumonia vaccination. We would advise that you only have the flu jab when you are well enough.

This leaflet has been reviewed by Readers' Panel

This leaflet is available in audio, large print, braille and other languages. To request a copy telephone  
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