

Exacerbations in COPD





Exacerbations Explained

It is usual for COPD to vary daily; however, if your symptoms worsen for two days or more, you may be experiencing a flare-up. Flare-ups of COPD are medically known as exacerbations.

Symptoms of Exacerbations

Symptoms of exacerbations include:

- Feeling more breathless than normal
- Coughing more than normal
- Producing more phlegm (mucus)
- Phlegm (mucus) changing colour or becoming thicker

Causes of Exacerbations

Causes of exacerbations may include:

- Viral infections, such as colds or the flu
- Changes in the weather
- Smokey environments
- High pollen levels
- Bacterial infections
- Pollution

How Is an Exacerbation Treated?

Exacerbations are treated using a drug known as a bronchodilator (reliever) that opens the airways, steroids that help control inflammation in the airways and antibiotics that treat the infection.

Bronchodilators

Salbutamol, Salamol, Terbutaline, Bricanyl, and Ventolin are all inhalers known as Bronchodilators. These should be taken more often when experiencing an exacerbation.

- Take them regularly-you can take up to ten puffs at a time (five if Bricanyl)
- If possible, a spacer should be used to ensure the drug is taken into the airways as it should be.

Steroids

Steroids reduce inflammation and swelling in the lungs, making breathing easier. Steroids stop exacerbations from worsening and help reduce the risk of being admitted to the hospital. The usual dose is 30mg (six tablets), to be taken daily. If steroids are prescribed, it is essential to complete the course to ensure that they work effectively. Steroids can have long-term health risks if used for prolonged periods. These can include Osteoporosis, low immunity, and Diabetes. Side effects are less likely when taken in short courses of one-two weeks.

Antibiotics

Antibiotics treat infections like chest infections. When antibiotics are being taken to treat an infection, it is important that the whole course is completed to ensure that they are effective. Taking antibiotics too regularly can lead to bug resistance, where the antibiotic is no longer effective at treating the infection it is needed for. It is important to take antibiotics when needed and when advised by a GP or other Healthcare Professional.



Why Should You Seek Help or Start Treatment for a Chest Infection Early?

Steroids and antibiotics work best when taken early in an infection (within 48 hours of symptoms starting). Starting treatment early can help reduce the risk of other complications caused by infection and can help to reduce the risk of being admitted to the hospital.



How to Get Treatment for an Exacerbation

A GP should be contacted to advise of symptoms during an exacerbation. If a rescue pack has been provided, this should be started, and the GP should be advised that it has already been used. If symptoms start on a weekday, it is important to contact the GP during working hours and avoid waiting until the weekend or in the evening when practices have closed. These times can be busy, and waits can be long. If symptoms start in the evening or at the weekend, call 111 for clinical advice and support.

The following symptoms need urgent medical attention, a GP or 111 should be contacted for an urgent appointment.

- Being too breathless to speak in sentences
- Being drowsy/confused
- Not being able to eat/drink
- Symptoms become worse after taking rescue medication, or there is no improvement after two days of taking rescue medication
- High temperature (fever)
- Coughing blood



How to Avoid an Exacerbation

To avoid an exacerbation, it is important to take all prescribed inhalers and medications as you have been advised to do so. If further training is needed to ensure your inhalers are being taken correctly, you can access this by speaking to your Pulmonary Rehabilitation group leader, GP, or respiratory team.

Other things that can help avoid exacerbation:

- Having an annual flu vaccine
- Having a pneumonia vaccine
- Keeping warm
- Keeping the house warm (not hot)
- Keeping well wrapped up in clothing while outside on a cold day
- Covering the nose and mouth with a scarf on a cold day
- Avoiding people who have colds (family and friends should not visit if they have colds)
- If living with somebody with a cold, ensure effective handwashing and cleaning of touch points with antibacterial wipes/spray. Touch points include door handles, light switches, and banister rails.
- Dispose of tissues
- Avoidance of smoky atmospheres
- Strong-smelling perfumes, aftershaves, hairsprays, air fresheners
- Grass cuttings
- Dust
- Strong-smelling paints/varnishes



Contact a GP Urgently if the Following Symptoms Are Experienced

- Worsening Blue lips, nose or fingertips
- Slight confusion/drowsiness
- Ankle swelling
- Coughing up small flecks of blood



An Ambulance Needs to Be Called if the Below Symptoms Occur

- Loss of consciousness
- Chest pain (crushing sensation)
- New, unexpected blue lips, nose, or fingertips
- Coughing up blood in large amounts
- Too breathless to speak in sentences
- Severe confusion



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