

Triborough community respiratory service

Managing your COPD flare up or exacerbation

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

This leaflet provides advice on managing your lung condition. If you have a lung condition like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) you might sometimes get worsening symptoms that need treatment – this is called a flare-up (exacerbation). It is important to know your normal lung symptoms well so that you can recognise the signs of a worsening. Then you can act quickly and get advice from your GP or specialist respiratory team.

What symptoms of COPD do you normally experience?

It is important to understand what your usual respiratory symptoms are so that you can recognise any changes when you are unwell. It might be helpful to keep a note of how often you cough or wheeze, have chest tightness or phlegm.

If you experience a change in your breathing from your usual symptoms, this could be a sign of a flare-up.

These symptom changes may include:

- being more short of breath than normal over hours and days (not sudden)
- producing more phlegm (mucus or sputum)
- phlegm changing colour from white to yellow/green/brown
- phlegm becoming thicker and difficult to bring up
- a wheeze and/ or cough which is worse than your normal
- a cold or sore throat
- new or increased ankle swelling

What to do if you think you're having a flare-up

People often put off getting help when their symptoms get worse, hoping they will get better on their own.

Sometimes they do, but it is safer to get treatment in the first few days of a flare-up. This can stop things getting worse and avoid you needing to go to hospital.

It will also help you recover more quickly, which is better for keeping your lungs healthier in the long-term. It's a good idea to follow any specific advice you have been given by your healthcare team.

Tip: Look at your written self-management plan if you have one.

Inhalers

Take your routine inhalers as prescribed. You can also take extra puffs of your reliever inhaler if you have one (like 'Salbutamol'). You can usually do this up to four to six times a day, ideally with a spacer device.

If you are not improving after extra puffs of your 'Salbutamol', it is important to speak with your GP or healthcare professional for advice.

Rescue pack

If you have a rescue pack, start your rescue medication, following the instructions on the packet. This could be **either or both** of the following:

- Antibiotics - if your phlegm has changed to yellow/green/brown. These are to treat an infection.
- Steroid tablets (prednisolone) - if you are very breathless or wheezy and it has not improved with your reliever inhalers. These are to decrease any inflammation. This would usually be usually six 5 milligram (mg) tablets a day for five to seven days.

If you start your rescue medication, it is important to tell your GP or respiratory healthcare professional.

Oxygen

Reminder oxygen: If you have been prescribed oxygen, try and keep it on during activities. You should use it as recommended on your prescription (do not turn it up). You might also be prescribed this while you recover from a pneumonia or a significant exacerbation.

Remote monitoring

We work closely with the remote monitoring team so we might offer you additional monitoring at home to help you recover from your exacerbation.

Pulmonary rehabilitation

Keeping active: If you have had a flare up of your breathing, you might be referred to pulmonary rehabilitation which can help you recover faster. www.imperial.nhs.uk/pulmonary-rehab

Other tips

- If you have family and friends nearby, keep in touch and let them know you need support. Search for [Asthma and Lung UK: managing COPD](#)
- Eat and drink as you are advised to vegetables and fruit and fluids as you have been advised. Search for [Asthma and Lung UK: eating well](#)
- Keeping well: keep warm at home with a room temperature of 18°C, stay active and wrap up with layers. Search for [Government advice: top tips for keeping warm and well this winter](#)
- Airway clearance: Search for [My Lungs My Life: how to clear your chest](#)
- Get help to stop smoking: ask your GP for support, or search for [Primary Care Respiratory Society: it's never too late to quit](#) and <https://stopsmokinglondon.com/how-to-quit-smoking/>
- Vaccinations: One of the keys to keeping well is to get your flu vaccine yearly and your covid vaccine or booster when you're offered them. If you are aged 75 to 79, you are also eligible for the respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccine. Search for [Asthma and Lung UK: how do you prevent RSV?](#)

If your symptoms worsen

If you are not improving:

- you have severe breathlessness
- or develop chest pain
- or are not coping

and it is outside of normal working hours, ring NHS 111/999.

If you can't speak to a doctor or healthcare professional and your symptoms are getting worse, go to your nearest A&E department very quickly or call 999.

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any **suggestions** or **comments** about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (**PALS**) on **020 3312 7777** (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: **020 3312 1337 / 1349**

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team:
imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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