Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is the name for a collection of lung diseases including chronic bronchitis, emphysema and chronic obstructive airways disease.

People with COPD have difficulties breathing, primarily due to the narrowing of their airways, this is called airflow obstruction.

Typical symptoms of COPD include:
- increasing breathlessness when active
- a persistent cough with phlegm
- frequent chest infections

Causes
The main cause of COPD is smoking. The likelihood of developing COPD increases the more you smoke and the longer you’ve been smoking. This is because smoking irritates and inflames the lungs, which results in scarring.

Over many years, the inflammation leads to permanent changes in the lungs. The walls of the airways thicken and more mucus is produced. Damage to the delicate walls of the air sacs in the lungs causes emphysema and the lungs lose their normal elasticity. The smaller airways also become scarred and narrowed. These changes cause the symptoms of breathlessness, cough and phlegm associated with COPD. Some cases of COPD are caused by fumes, dust, air pollution and genetic disorders, but these are rarer.

Who is affected?
COPD is one of the most common respiratory diseases in the UK. It usually only starts to affect people over the age of 35, although most people are not diagnosed until they are in their 50s. It is thought there are more than 3 million people living with the disease in the UK, of which only about 900,000 have been diagnosed. This is because many people who develop symptoms of COPD do not get medical help because they often dismiss their symptoms as a ‘smoker’s cough’.

COPD affects more men than women, although rates in women are increasing.

Symptoms of COPD
Symptoms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) usually develop over a number of years, so you may not be aware you have the condition.

Middle-aged smokers and ex-smokers who have a persistent chesty cough (especially in the morning), breathlessness on slight exertion or persistent coughs and colds in the winter should see their GP or practice nurse for a simple breathing test. If you have COPD, the airways of the lungs become inflamed and narrowed. As the air sacs get permanently damaged, it will become increasingly difficult to breathe out. While there is currently no cure for COPD, the sooner the condition is diagnosed and appropriate treatment begins, the less chance there is of severe lung damage.
Flare-ups
Symptoms of COPD are often worse in winter, and it is common to have two or more flare-ups a year. A flare-up (also known as an exacerbation) is when your symptoms are particularly bad. This is one of the most common reasons for people being admitted to hospital in the UK.

Other signs of COPD
Other signs of COPD can include:
• weight loss
• tiredness and fatigue
• swollen ankles

Living with COPD
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can affect many aspects of your life. However, there are some simple tips and techniques to help reduce its impact.

Self care
Self care involves taking responsibility for your own health and wellbeing with support from people involved in your care. People living with long-term conditions can benefit enormously if they receive support for self-care. They can live longer, have less pain, anxiety, depression and fatigue, a better quality of life and are more active and independent. For more information and help with self care, speak to your healthcare team or GP.

Take your medication
It’s important to take your medication as prescribed, even if you start to feel better. Continuous medication can help prevent flare-ups. If you have questions or concerns about the medication you’re taking or side effects, talk to your healthcare team. It may also be useful to read the information leaflet that comes with the medication about possible interactions with other drugs or supplements. Check with your healthcare team if you plan to take any over the counter remedies, such as painkillers, or any nutritional supplements. This is because these can sometimes interfere with your medication.

Can COPD be prevented?
Although COPD causes about 25,000 deaths a year in the UK, severe COPD can usually be prevented by making changes to your lifestyle. If you smoke, stopping is the single most effective way to reduce your risk of getting the condition. Research has shown you are up to four times more likely to succeed in giving up smoking if you use NHS support along with stop-smoking medicines such as patches or gum. Ask your doctor about this, or call the NHS Smoking Helpline on 0300 123 1044.

Who to contact if you are concerned
If you have any concerns about your symptoms you should contact your GP or call 111 for advice.

Useful links
Have your say
We would be very grateful if you would complete a feedback card before you leave. It’s your chance to have your say on the treatment you have received in hospital. Feedback helps us continually improve the service we give to our patients.

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The information in this factsheet has been adapted from NHS Choices www.nhs.uk

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone 023 8120 4688 for help.