

Helping Someone Who Is Experiencing an Exacerbation

When caring for someone with COPD, it's important to be able to recognize an exacerbation so you can offer appropriate assistance.

Recognizing the symptoms.

The following changes in your loved one's symptoms may be signs of an exacerbation, and require changes or additions to their treatment:

- Shorter breath than usual
- More coughing
- More sputum or mucus
- Wheezing

In addition, the symptom changes below may be signs of a lung infection that requires an antibiotic:

- Sputum or mucus that is yellow, green, or bloody
- Fever

If you notice one or more of these symptom changes in your loved one, be sure to contact the proper healthcare professional as soon as possible.

If the friend or family member that you are caring for is experiencing severe shortness of breath, agitation, confusion, drowsiness, or chest pain, get immediate medical attention by dialing 911 or heading to the emergency room.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

For an exacerbation without evidence of infection, you can:

- Help by instructing pursed lip breathing techniques
- Guide your loved one in relaxation techniques
- Decrease exposure to factors that worsen breathing such as: cold temperatures, humidity, exercise, wind, etc.
- Help your loved one use their rescue and other medication(s) as directed by their doctor

For an exacerbation with evidence of infection (change in sputum color, increased amount of sputum, and/or fever):

- Start with the actions at left for exacerbation without infection

AND:

- Notify your loved one's physician about the infection and follow any additional instructions
- Help your loved one take any additional medications their doctor prescribes for them

Exacerbation Quick Symptom Guide

Use the guide below for a quick, easy way to identify symptoms and the proper action they require.

For initial signs and symptoms, follow home exacerbation plan as discussed and outlined with your loved one's healthcare provider:

- Worsening of previously stable condition
- Increased difficulty breathing, even at rest
- Increased wheezing
- Increased coughing
- Increased amount of sputum production
- A change in the characteristics of sputum, such as appearing to be more thick/sticky, a change in color from clear or white to yellowish or green, or the presence of blood in the sputum
- Chest tightness
- Fever
- Irritability and/or change in personality
- Fluid retention (swelling in the hands or feet)
- Forgetfulness, confusion, slurring of speech, and sleepiness

Call your loved one's healthcare provider within 24 hours if you notice one or more of the following respiratory symptoms:

- The person you're caring for is using their inhaler or nebulizer more frequently to maintain breathing
- They experience change in color, thickness, or odor of sputum, or the amount of sputum persists
- Ankle swelling lasts even after a night of sleep with their feet up
- They awaken short of breath more than once a night
- Fatigue lasts more than one day
- Persistent fever

Call your loved one's healthcare provider immediately if the following signs and symptoms are present:

- Disorientation, confusion, slurring of speech, or sleepiness occurs during an acute respiratory infection
- Shortness of breath or wheezing does not stop or decrease with inhaled bronchodilator treatments. Or they are requiring more frequent inhaler or nebulizer use

Go immediately to the emergency room when the person you are caring for is experiencing a loss of alertness or any two or more of the following:

- Marked increase in intensity of symptoms such as sudden development of resting dyspnea (shortness of breath)
- Overuse of upper chest and neck muscles, also called accessory muscles, to be able to breathe
- Significant increase or decrease in respiratory rate
- Significant increase in heart rate