

# Treatments for COPD

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**There is no cure for COPD, but treatment can help you control your symptoms, so you can enjoy life. Appropriate treatment will help you feel better and may help you live longer.**

Medication is just part of the treatment of COPD. Your health-care provider will also talk to you about implementing lifestyle changes that will help you live better with COPD. Avoiding exposure to triggers (things that make your breathing worse), planning your activity, and using special breathing techniques to improve oxygen flow to your lungs can help you feel better. People with COPD benefit from more rather than less exercise. Oxygen therapy can also be used to treat COPD. Your health-care provider will work with you to determine what combination of medications and interventions is most effective to control your COPD.

Because COPD is a progressive disease, your treatment plan will probably change over time. It's important to see your health-care provider on a regular basis so that your treatment plan can be tweaked as needed.

Medications are used to open up the airways and improve the flow of air and oxygen to the body. COPD medications are generally divided into two main categories: **maintenance medications** and **rescue medications**.

**Maintenance medications** are those taken on a daily basis. They are the ones that help you maintain a “baseline.” They should be taken every day (whether or not you feel symptoms) and work to control symptoms over the long run.

**Rescue medications** are taken during COPD flare-ups or for immediate relief of symptoms. They are “sometimes” medications, to be used only when your breathing or COPD is bad. Your health-care provider will let you know when and under what conditions you should take your rescue medication(s).

A variety of medications can be used as maintenance or rescue medications. Some of the most common COPD medications are:

**Bronchodilators.** These are medications that dilate, or open up, the airways. They are usually given through an inhaler or nebulizer machine, but sometimes pills are used. There are both long-acting and short-acting bronchodilators. Long-acting bronchodilators may be used as maintenance medication. Short-acting bronchodilators are used as rescue medication.

**Corticosteroids.** Also known simply as “steroids,” these medications decrease inflammation and swelling and are used to keep the airways open in COPD. Steroids used to treat COPD are not the same as anabolic steroids, which are muscle-building steroids often misused by athletes and others. Steroids for COPD come in both pill and inhaler form and can be used as both maintenance and rescue medication.

**Antibiotics.** Antibiotics are used to treat bacterial infections of the lungs. They are most commonly used during COPD exacerbations as part of your COPD action plan. Antibiotics are only effective against bacteria, so see your health-care provider as soon as you think you have an infection. He or she will try to figure out what's causing the infection and order appropriate treatment.



It's important to take all of your medication as prescribed. Your health-care provider and pharmacist will review your medications with you. Make sure you ask questions if you don't understand what a medication is, what it's used for, or when or how to take it.

Taking your medication properly is your responsibility. Here are some tips to help you:

- Organize your medication with a pill box, a chart, or around routine events like meals or brushing your teeth. This makes it easier to remember to take your medication and easier to tell if you've missed a dose!
- Check with your insurance plan to see which are the preferred medications on the plan, and see if your health-care provider thinks your disease can be managed well with those medications. Using preferred medications may save you money.

If your drug insurance plan has a 90-day mail away benefit, use it. You will save money.

- Do not skip your medication or skimp on your doses. Not taking the right amount of your medication can make your COPD worse and may result in an expensive hospitalization.
- If you're worried about paying for your medication, let your health-care provider know. Many drug companies offer patient assistance programs; your health-care provider can help you explore your options.
- Use inhalers and nebulizers properly so you get the full benefit of the medication. Your health-care provider will show you how to use your inhaler(s) and/or nebulizer.

### **Surgical Options for the Treatment of COPD**

Surgery to treat or control COPD may be an option for severe disease in very select patients. The two most common surgical treatments for COPD are lung volume reduction surgery and lung transplantation.

#### **Lung Volume Reduction Surgery**

This surgery is used to remove diseased portions of one or both lungs. When these portions of the lung are removed, the volume of the lungs inside the rib cage is reduced, making it easier for people to breathe.

Because all surgeries include some risk, your health-care providers will carefully evaluate you to see if lung volume reduction surgery is a good choice for you.

#### **Lung Transplantation**

A lung transplant replaces one or both diseased lungs with those of a donor. To be considered a candidate for lung transplantation, generally you must:

- Be oxygen-dependent.
- Have severe COPD that no longer responds to medical treatment and may be fatal within 2 years.
- Be physically able to undergo the surgery and the treatment that follows.
- Usually be under the age of 65, but some centers will perform transplants on older patients.

Lung transplantation has many risks, and donor lungs are not easily available. Waiting for a donor lung can sometimes take 2 or more years. Also, after surgery, you will need to take many different medications for the rest of your life to prevent rejection of the transplanted lungs and to prevent infection.