

COPD EXACERBATION – WHAT CAN I DO?



Diagram: MedicalGraphics / www.medicalgraphics.de

DEAR PATIENT,

COPD stands for Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease. The state of health of a patient suffering from COPD can undergo repeated onsets of acute worsening. Specialists call these onsets exacerbations. The term flare-ups is also used. This information leaflet contains important information on how to recognise this serious development and the right way to behave in a threatening situation (For basic information about COPD, see overleaf).

▶ CAUSES OF EXACERBATION

Acute exacerbations occur particularly during advanced stages of the disease, mostly in winter.

They are caused for example by:

- infections such as colds and flu, the most frequent cause;
- air pollution (smog);
- medicines that inhibit respiration, for example, sleeping tablets;
- accompanying disorders such as heart disease;

▶ SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF EXACERBATION

A COPD exacerbation can happen very suddenly, although sometimes it can adopt a more insidious form and may vary considerably in intensity from case to case.

It is important for you to recognise the signs of exacerbation early on. You may need a higher dose of your medication or additional medication. If you are suffering from a bacterial infection, you may also require antibiotics.

The symptoms are:

- increasing breathlessness;
- more frequent, increased coughing;
- increased sputum production;
- thicker sputum;
- change in the colour of the sputum (yellow-green);
- tiredness, fatigue and/or a high temperature.

Go and see your doctor if the exacerbation lasts longer than 24 hours!

▶ WHAT TO DO IN THE CASE OF A SEVERE EXACERBATION

In the case of a sudden, serious exacerbation, you should do the following:

- Keep calm and adopt a body position that alleviates breathing, for instance the coachman's position. In addition, use the pursed lip breathing technique (see overleaf).
- Take two puffs of your bronchodilator standby medication. You should discuss in advance with your doctor which medicine is your standby medicine.
- Wait 10 to 15 minutes.
- If your condition doesn't improve, phone the doctor on call. Dial the emergency number:

112

▶ WHAT ELSE YOU CAN DO

- Attend patient training. You will learn how to improve the inhalation technique of your medication. Furthermore, you will learn how to adjust your medication to the severity of your disorder. This reduces the number of acute exacerbations. This is an important goal because each flare-up has an unfavourable impact on the further course of COPD.
- Have your flu vaccination every year and a vaccination against pneumococcus. Pneumococci are bacteria that can frequently trigger respiratory or pulmonary infections. Your doctor can advise you on the vaccinations.
- Learn self-help techniques that can assist you in the event of breathlessness. They also help you to cough up sputum. These techniques include the pursed lip breathing and body positions that make it easier to breathe, for example the “coachman’s position”.

Pursed lip breathing:

Keep lips slightly open. When breathing out slowly, pucker your lips. This keeps air for longer in your mouth and creates a slight pressure. This pressure continues down the respiratory tract and prevents smaller, already constricted bronchi from “collapsing”. The airways remain wide and breathing becomes easier.

The coachman’s position

Sit with your legs slightly apart. Place your elbows on your thighs. Tilt your head forward. Relax your shoulders and neck. Close your eyes and breathe quietly and evenly.



▶ MORE INFORMATION

This Patient Information is based on the latest scientific findings and sums up the most important points from the Patient Guideline “COPD”.

Other useful links

PatientenLeitlinie “COPD”: (Patient Guideline “COPD”) and Patienteninformation “COPD” (Patient Information “COPD”)
www.patienten-information.de/patientenleitlinien

Self-help organisations and co-operation partners involved in the Patient Guideline
www.patienten-information.de/patientenbeteiligung/selbsthilfe, www.azq.de/pf

Self-help contact

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, Tel.: 030 3101 8960

Patient Guidelines

Patient Guidelines translate the treatment recommendations in medical guidelines into everyday language that can be understood by ordinary people. They provide important background information on the causes, examination methods and treatment of a disease. The BÄK (German Medical Association), the KBV (National Associations of Statutory Health Insurance Physicians) and the AWMF (Association of Scientific Medical Societies) working group are the co-ordinators of the programme for the development of medical guidelines (“National Medical Guidelines”) and the respective patient versions.

DOI: 10.6101/AZQ/000070

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