How are COPD and CHF Different?

by PATRICIA BRATIANU

Is COPD or CHF Making It Hard for You to Breathe?

When you have COPD, pressure within your lungs can cause fluid to accumulate in the tissues of your heart, leading to the development of congestive heart failure (CFH). But COPD and CHF can occur independently of each other as well.

A number of the symptoms of COPD and CHF resemble each other, while others are different. Let's compare them.

Signs of COPD

Here are some characteristics of COPD.

- **Fatigue –** Simple activities may tire you out quickly.
- **Shortness of breath –** Taking a deep breath may be impossible, while exhaling may also be difficult and take longer than inhaling. As you exhale you may hear small crackling, wheezing, or popping sounds coming from your chest, and it may be impossible for you to take a deep breath. If you have emphysema, you may breathe rapidly.
- **Cough –** You may have a harsh cough accompanied by spasms and frequent repeated coughing episodes. Your cough will likely produce phlegm – this can be a lot or just a little.
- **Confusion –** During acute flare-ups of COPD, your brain may not get enough oxygen. You may feel panicky, irritable, disoriented, confused, or sleepy. You may suffer from headaches.
- **Swelling –** Your legs and feet may swell.
- **Pain –** Your chest and abdomen may feel sore because your muscles have to work so hard to help you breathe. If you have frequent coughing spells they can contribute to chest and abdominal discomfort too.
- **Pink or blue skin –** Your complexion may be pink or blue and you may bruise easily. Your skin may be frail and thin.
- **Protruding veins –** The muscles and veins in your neck may protrude.
- **Bloating –** You may suffer from constipation, gas, and bloating, causing your stomach to protrude.
- **Barrel chest –** Chronic emphysema can cause your chest to take on a barrel shape, because air gets trapped in your lung tissues. The small structures, called alveoli, stay inflated like tiny balloons.
- **Frequent infections –** Chronic bronchitis is characterized by the occurrence of frequent respiratory infections.
- **Anxiety –** You may feel anxious frequently, especially at night. Depression may occur.
- **Weight changes –** You may gain or lose weight.
- **Dizziness –** COPD dizziness is a common symptom many sufferers experience.

Complications of COPD

COPD can cause the right side of your heart to enlarge. This is a serious condition called cor pulmonale. Lung

infections may arise as a complication of chronic bronchitis. You are more susceptible to getting influenza and pneumonia. Peptic ulcer disease and gastrointestinal reflux disease (GERD) are more common among individuals who have COPD when compared with people who don't have COPD, as there is a connection between acid reflux and COPD. You may develop acute respiratory failure.

Next page: signs of CHF.

Signs of CHF

With CHF your heart does not pump well, so pressure builds up in your lungs and blood vessels of your chest. Symptoms vary depending upon which side of your heart is affected.

- **Fatigue –** Often the first symptom of CHF is fatigue.
- **Racing heart –** You may notice your heart rate increase.
- **Shortness of breath –** Breathing becomes more difficult. At night, you may be able to fall asleep but after a couple of hours you may suddenly awaken, feeling very short of breath and restless. Breathing is easier when you are sitting up. If your CHF is severe, you may breathe rapidly and have to gasp for each breath.
- **Weak cough –** You may or may not have a cough. If you have left sided heart failure, you may have a dry, hacking cough. Your cough may produce white, pink, or frothy phlegm, or none at all. You may also wheeze as you breathe.
- **Dizziness –** You may feel weak and dizzy, confused, restless, and you may even lose consciousness.
- **Swelling –** Swelling may occur in your legs and feet. If you have severe CHF, your entire body may swell.
- **Pain –** Swelling within your abdomen may cause you to have pain. Pain is usually greatest in the upper right side of the abdomen. You may gain weight as you retain fluid.
- **Cool, pale skin –** You may be pale. If breathing is very difficult, you may be sweaty and your complexion may have a blue or grey tinge. This is likely to be especially apparent around your lips. Your skin may be cool.
- **Protruding veins –** The veins in your neck may protrude.
- **Feeling ill –** You may feel bloated and nauseated, and may vomit.

Complications of CHF

Fluid may accumulate in your lungs, making breathing difficult. This can result in infections such as pneumonia.

You are also at risk for developing a blood clot in the left side of your heart, which could travel to your brain and cause a stroke. Your kidneys and liver may become damaged due to the imbalance of fluids.

COPD and CHF

Many symptoms of COPD and CHF are similar, so it can be difficult to tell them apart. Having both diseases can make treatment more challenging, but most people who have CHF and/or COPD are able to live fairly normal lives.

If you experience difficulty breathing or think that you have COPD or CHF, see your doctor. **Seek emergency medical treatment promptly if your shortness of breath is severe, as both illnesses can be life threatening.**