The Link Between COPD and Smoking

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COPD and Smoking: How Are The Two Related?

Smoking is one of the causes of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

Smoking damages airways, air sacs, and the lining of your lungs. Damaged lungs cannot do their job of moving air in and out – making it hard to breathe.

COPD Prevalence

COPD has become the third leading cause of death in the United States, according to data from the National Center for Health Statistics, a division of the American Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) reported that at least 12 million adults have been diagnosed with COPD. It is also believed that another 12 million are undiagnosed.

The NIH further reports that 120,000 people die each year from COPD complications. It appears more women are dying from COPD than men, and these numbers have increased in recent years.

Doctors recognize the role that tobacco use plays in the development of COPD but getting people to quit smoking isn't easy. The good news is that smoking cessation programs have gotten better and smokers can benefit from a variety of treatment methods.

COPD and Smoking Statistics

According to the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, there have been at least one hundred million deaths in the 20th century related to smoking. That number is predicted to be one billion for tobacco use in the 21st century.

Lifelong smokers have a 50% chance of developing COPD and breathing in second-hand smoke can increase their chances of developing COPD.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, smoking causes up to 80% of COPD deaths. Smoking during childhood and teen years also slows down lung growth development and increases the risk of COPD development in adulthood.

There are, of course, some people who develop COPD and have never smoked, 1 in 4 people with COPD have never smoked.

The best treatment for COPD is to quit smoking as there is evidence that COPD progression is reduced when you stop smoking. However, according to the CDC, up to 39% of people with COPD continue to smoke.

Quitting smoking is the best thing you can do for your lungs and it can keep COPD symptoms from worsening. When you can breathe better, you can live a fuller life.

While it is not easy to quit – newer treatment options are making it a lot easier.

Secondhand smoke also causes COPD flares and further damage, steps should be taken to avoid secondhand smoke.

Why You Should Quit Smoking

A report from earlier this year published in the journal *Respirology* compared the airway walls of smokers, people with COPD, and healthy people. What the researchers found was that there were significantly fewer airway cells in smokers and individuals with COPD.

While this changes previous ideas about airway inflammation, continuing to smoke still worsens the severity of these kinds of abnormalities and makes a living with COPD harder.

Numerous studies have found that quitting smoking is the most effective treatment for COPD.

People with COPD who quit smoking have fewer COPD flares, fewer hospital stays, and a reduced risk of dying from COPD complications. Quitting also protects loved ones from the effects of second-hand smoking.

Finding the motivation to quit is hard because nicotine is addictive and for a lot of people it can be challenging to quit at first.

The good news is that research shows people living with COPD that want to quit are more successful than individuals seeking to quit.

One study from Finland, reported in the medical journal *Pulmonary Medicine* looked at the success rates for smoking cessation in people with COPD.

The study of 739 people found 60 percent of men and 56 percent of women successfully stopped smoking after five years of being diagnosed with COPD. The ones that weren't able to quit had other obstacles, including alcohol abuse and mental health issues.

Are You Ready to Quit?

Helpful ways to quit smoking include:

- **Medications.** Smoking cessation drugs help with tobacco cravings and withdrawal symptoms. They also keep you from wanting to smoke again.
- **Nicotine replacement therapies (NRT).** NRT reduces withdrawal symptoms by giving you a small - but controlled - amount of nicotine. This amount is enough to satisfy cravings and helps reduce your urge to smoke.
- **Support groups and counseling.** Having support from others – friends, family, coworkers, a professional or support group - increases your chances of success. And you need all the encouragement and support you can get.
- **Cold turkey.** That is, without aids, therapy or medicine. It is not the most effective or successful method, but it does work for some people.

No matter what method you choose to quit smoking, make sure you make a plan you can stick to.

Pick a quit date that gives you enough time without losing your motivation and even if you are not successful at first, keep trying. Don't forget to get rid of all cigarettes and ashtrays and figure out triggers so that you can avoid them.

Avoid Secondhand Smoke

Secondhand smoke occurs as result of breathing in air containing tobacco products.

While smokers inhale poisonous substances directly and purposefully, nonsmokers do it indirectly and often, without choice.

According to the American Lung Association, secondhand smoke is responsible for over 41,000 deaths every year and there are no safe levels of secondhand smoke.

Second-hand smoke is a trigger for COPD flares and it may cause more damage to your lungs.

Here are just a few suggestions to avoiding second-hand smoke:

1. **Take steps to avoid secondhand smoke.** Make sure your home and car are smoke-free places and make sure others follow these rules.
2. **Stay away from public places that allow smoking.** Try to go to restaurants, bars and other social places that are smoke-free.
3. **If there are smokers in your workplace, use an exit where you can avoid smokers as you leave the building.** Ask your smoking co-workers to keep their coats away from work areas.
4. **You get to set the rules for how much second-hand smoke you and your family breathe.** Remind people if they would like to smoke, to smoke far away from where you are. Don't be afraid to remind them of your health.

It’s Never Too Late

It is never too late for you to quit smoking.

If you quit now, you will slow down the progression of COPD and improve your overall life quality.

Once you have quit, do everything you can to avoid secondhand smoke and don’t concern yourself with anyone who takes offense because everyone is entitled to breathe clean and fresh air.