

# Understanding my COPD



You have been diagnosed with COPD and you probably have questions. This fact sheet explains what you need to know about this disease and how to control its symptoms.

## What is COPD?

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a combination of two diseases:

- Emphysema
- Chronic bronchitis

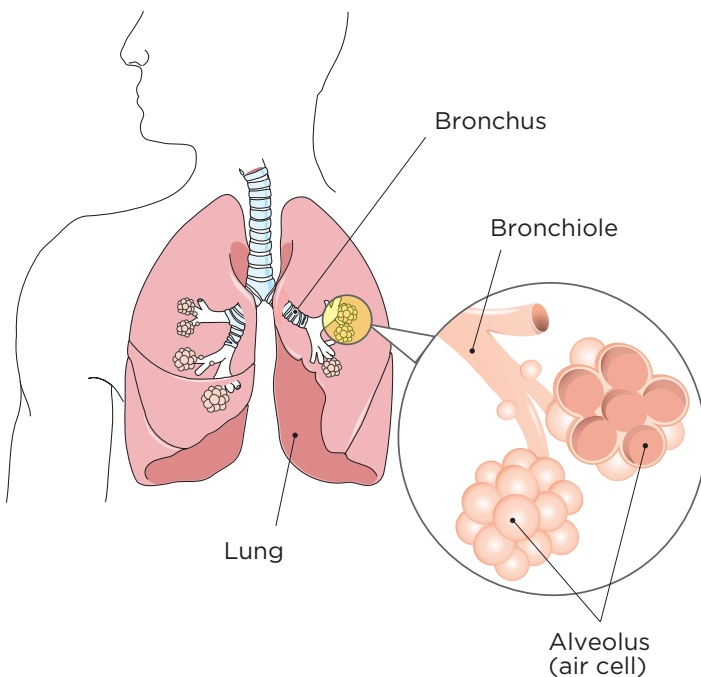
You can have one or the other, or both.

## What is emphysema?

This disease affects the small sacs where the air we breathe interacts with the blood: the alveoli of the lungs. These small sacs become enlarged and their elastic walls are gradually destroyed. It then becomes difficult to exhale.

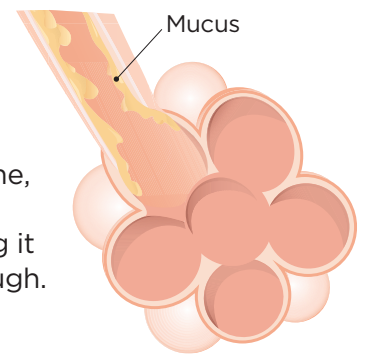


## The respiratory system



## What is chronic bronchitis?

It is a permanent swelling of the ducts that carry air into the lungs (bronchi and bronchioles) with too much mucus production. Over time, these ducts shrink and the mucus accumulates, making it difficult for air to pass through.



## What are the symptoms of COPD?

There are many. Here are the main ones:



- shortness of breath
- fatigue
- cough, with or without secretions
- wheezing
- weight loss
- disturbed sleep
- difficulty breathing when lying down

The doctor will confirm the presence of the disease based on tests and examinations.

## What causes COPD?

Smoking is the most common cause of COPD. But it can also be caused by:

- the smoking of others (second-hand smoke)
- air pollution
- prolonged exposure to chemical products, such as household cleaning products or others
- many lung infections in childhood
- a rare genetic disease

## How can I reduce and control my symptoms?

Your lungs are sensitive to the environment. If you can identify what makes your symptoms worse and change certain lifestyle habits, you can improve your quality of life.



Here are the most important things to do:

### > Stop smoking

The toxic products in tobacco damage your lungs and weaken your lung function. Your bronchial tubes produce mucus to expel toxic products. If the mucus accumulates, this increases the risk of respiratory infections (colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, etc.).

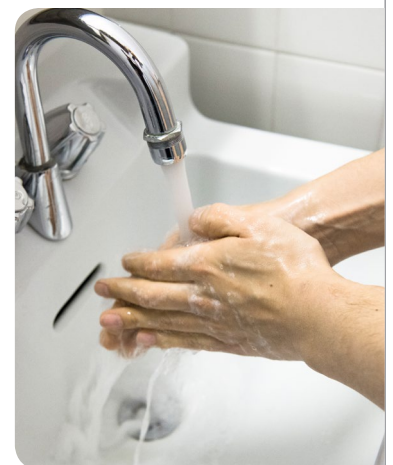
Here are some tips to help you quit smoking.

- Avoid going to places where there are smokers.
- Encourage your loved ones to stop smoking.
- Consult a professional to help you stop smoking.
- Read our fact sheets on how to stop smoking. They will help you.

### > Get a flu shot and a pneumococcal vaccine (see your doctor for the latter)

Your lungs are weaker. They may take longer to recover from an infection. The flu shot is a good way to reduce the risk of infections that could make your condition worse. In addition, to reduce these risks:

- Wash your hands often. Do it every time you have been in a public place.
- Stay away from people who have flu symptoms (cough, fever, fatigue).
- Wash your aerochamber once a week.





> **Do some physical activity**

The more you move, the better the respiratory symptoms of COPD are controlled. Consult the [\*Bouger pour mieux vivre avec ma MPOC\*](#) fact sheet (French only).

> **Ask about how to use your pumps properly**



> **Emotional situations**

Strong emotions can make your bronchi tighten up. Breathing becomes difficult.

- Stay calm and express your feelings.
- Do breathing and relaxation exercises.

> **Pollution and dust**

Air pollution and dust increase mucus and coughing.

- If outdoor air quality is poor (smog, pollution, etc.), stay indoors.
- Don't park in underground parking garages.
- Don't put carpets in your home.
- Vacuum frequently and remove dust from furniture.
- Don't keep animals. If you have pets and don't want to part with them, keep them out of your bedroom. Don't let them climb on the furniture.
- Use a dryer to dry your clothes.
- Wash your sheets and blankets every week.

## What should I watch for?

Other factors can make your symptoms worse:

> **Changes in temperature and air**

Your lungs don't adapt well to sudden changes in air (humidity, cold, heat, wind, etc.). Your bronchioles and bronchial tubes tighten. Air has trouble getting through. You feel as if you're suffocating.

- Cover your nose with a scarf when it's very cold or windy.
- Stay indoors when it's very humid and hot outside.
- If you can, install air conditioning at home.
- Don't do any intense physical activity and avoid going outdoors when it's very hot or very cold.
- Always have your pumps with you.

> **Strong odours and chemical products**

- When using paint or varnish, perfume, hair care products, etc., ventilate the rooms.
- Buy green (ecological) cleaning products.
- Don't wear perfume, and ask your loved ones to do the same.



## When should I worry?

Be alert if your symptoms get worse for more than 48 hours and you need to use your pumps more often. If you are more out of breath, if you cough more, if your sputum becomes coloured, consult your nurse or doctor.



## Who should I contact for help?

Consult your healthcare professional for more advice. You can also call Info-Santé at **8-1-1**, or visit a walk-in clinic or a CLSC.

Also see the fact sheets (French only):

- > [\*Bouger pour mieux vivre avec ma MPOC.\*](#)
- > [\*Quoi manger pour mieux vivre avec la MPOC.\*](#)



## USEFUL RESOURCES

Canadian Lung Association:  
> [lung.ca](http://lung.ca)

Living Well with COPD:  
> [livingwellwithcopd.com](http://livingwellwithcopd.com)

To stop smoking:  
Consult your CLSC's smoking cessation centre.

I QUIT NOW helpline:  
> **866 527-7383**  
> [tobaccofreequebec.ca/iquitnow/](http://tobaccofreequebec.ca/iquitnow/)

To manage your energy:  
> [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)  
Enter: "COPD vignette Save your energy"

Other health sheets published by the CHUM are available. Ask for those that might fit your situation.



You can also find them on our web site  
[chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante](http://chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante)



## Questions

Write down any questions you want to ask your care team so you don't forget anything.



*The content of this document in no way replaces the recommendations and diagnoses made, or the treatment suggested by your health professional.*

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal  
[chumontreal.qc.ca](http://chumontreal.qc.ca)