

# Managing COPD and keeping well during winter (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

## Introduction

COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease) is the name for a group of lung conditions that cause breathing difficulties. It includes diseases such as Emphysema and Chronic Bronchitis.

Winter can be a difficult time for people with COPD. Cold weather can make symptoms worse and cause a flare up (health care staff call this an exacerbation). This leaflet provides advice about how to avoid a flare up and guidance on what to do if it happens.

## Be prepared and help prevent yourself becoming unwell

Cold weather can really affect people with COPD. There are a number of things which can help keep you well.

- Protect against flu by getting the flu vaccination (flu jab)
- Keep warm in winter – both inside and outdoors, so if possible keep homes at least 18°C (65°F). The organisation 'Warm and Well in North Yorkshire' can help if you are facing difficulties. They can be contacted on 01609 767 555 or visit their website <https://www.warmandwell.org.uk/>
- Keep taking your prescribed medication.
- If you smoke – do your best to stop. You can find help by contacting Smokefree life North Yorkshire on **0800 2465215** <https://www.smokefreelifenorthyorkshire.co.uk/Contact-Us.aspx>
- If you do have an exacerbation of COPD you may find the information below helpful.

## What is an exacerbation?

An exacerbation (or flare up) of your COPD is a worsening of symptoms that requires changes to your treatment. Many people with COPD have times when they find it harder to breathe than normal and may have a cough with yellow or green phlegm (sputum)

## What causes an exacerbation?

Many exacerbations are caused by an infection, although air pollution (either from the outside air or smoky environments) and changes in the weather can also cause them.

## How do I recognise an exacerbation?

Symptoms may include:

- Increase in coughing
- Changes in the amount, thickness and/or colour of your phlegm
- Increase in breathlessness
- Chest tightness
- Wheezing
- Fever, night sweats

**If 2 or more of these symptoms persist for 48 hours** or more then you are probably experiencing an exacerbation/flare-up.

### **What do I do when I have an exacerbation?**

Whenever you have an exacerbation you should start your 'rescue medication' if you have been given some in advance, contact your GP practice or call NHS 111 by dialling '111'. **Do not delay if your symptoms are worsening.**

To help you get over your exacerbation:

- Your doctor may need to prescribe you some antibiotics and/or steroids.
- You may also need to take your reliever medication (puffers or nebulisers) more often to ease your breathing. You may need to continue this until your breathing becomes easier again.
- During this "flare-up" you must continue to drink plenty of fluids and eat little and often.
- Balance activity with plenty of rests. Do as little as possible, but get out of bed wherever you can during the daytime. Sitting out in a chair is better for your recovery than lying in bed.
- Make sure you are getting enough to eat and drink. Warm drinks can be helpful to both keep you warm, keep you hydrated and can be soothing.

### **How long does an exacerbation last?**

Normally, patients make a full recovery within about a week/fortnight. Most people can be treated at home. On some occasions, if the exacerbation is particularly bad, a short stay in hospital may be needed.

### **How can I prevent an exacerbation happening?**

Most exacerbations are caused by infections. These infections are often picked up from people around you who have a "cough and a cold". Some people have frequent flare-ups and others no more than anyone else without COPD.

Most flare-ups happen during the colder seasons and therefore it is more likely you will get an exacerbation during autumn or winter. To help with prevention of flare-ups you could plan your activities to avoid the worst of the weather. If you are at risk of having frequent flare-ups your GP may think you will benefit from keeping a spare course of antibiotics and steroid tablets at home in case of an exacerbation.

If you are experiencing an exacerbation it is essential you recognise your symptoms and know what to do. Your GP or practice nurse can advise you about this.

### **Flu Jab and Pneumonia Jab**

It is recommended that all patients with a chronic lung condition get both their flu jab and their pneumonia vaccination every year. We would advise that you only have the flu jab when you are well enough. Encourage your family and those close to you to have a flu jab too as this can avoid them passing the infection to you.