

Learning About Lung Health

Q: What are the major lung conditions elders should know about?

A: Diseases of the lung are almost as common as breathing air. Lung problems that are common among older people include: chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), pneumonia, lung cancer, and asthma.

The Centers for Disease Control estimates that 18.4 million American adults currently have asthma. Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in the U.S. and the second most common cancer among both men and women. Almost 15.7 million people have been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which is the third leading cause of death. The American Lung Association estimates that in 2016 there were 555,374 adults in Massachusetts diagnosed with asthma, 307,924 people with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and 4,302 people with lung disease.

***Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)** is a disease that makes it hard to breathe. It can be caused by smoking, secondhand smoke, air pollution, chemical fumes, even dust. There are two types of COPD: emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Shortness of breath is one of the most common symptoms of COPD. People who have COPD may feel like their chest is so tight that they can't breathe. They may cough a lot. The coughing may or may not produce sticky, slimy mucus. COPD can also cause wheezing. COPD develops slowly and worsens over time. Shortness of breath may occur even when resting. COPD can lead to strain on the heart, which can result in swollen ankles, feet, or legs. In advanced stages of COPD, people can have blue lips because they do not have enough oxygen in their blood. In older adults, COPD can sometimes be confused with asthma.

Although there is no cure for COPD, if you are a smoker who quits, you may breathe more easily and add years to your life. Your doctor might prescribe an inhaler, a special exercise program, breathing techniques, or extra oxygen. People with COPD should get shots to prevent the flu and pneumonia.

***Pneumonia** is an infection of one or both of your lungs that can exhibit as a fever, chills, trouble

breathing, and a cough with mucus. Pneumonia can make you feel very tired, or sick to your stomach. For some older people, pneumonia can be a serious problem that takes 3 weeks or longer to overcome. Pneumonia is most common in the winter months. It's caused by germs like bacteria, viruses, and fungi. If you smoke or drink a lot of alcohol, your chance of getting pneumonia goes up. You can come in contact with germs that cause pneumonia during a hospital stay or in a nursing facility. Your doctor can do a physical exam to test for pneumonia, take a chest x-ray, or analyze a blood sample. Mild pneumonia can sometimes be treated at home, with pills to fight the infection. Sometimes pneumonia must be treated in the hospital. To prevent pneumonia, don't smoke, get a shot for the flu and pneumonia, wash your hands often with soap and water, and cover your nose and mouth when you sneeze or cough.

***Lung Cancer** symptoms include a cough that does not go away and gets worse over time, constant chest pain, coughing up blood, problems with breathing, wheezing, or hoarseness, problems with pneumonia, swelling of the neck and face, loss of appetite or weight loss. Treatment is based on the type of lung cancer you have and whether or not it has spread to other parts of the body. It also depends on your general health.

***Asthma** is a condition in which your airways narrow and swell and produce extra mucus. This can make breathing difficult and trigger coughing, wheezing and shortness of breath. For some people, asthma is a minor nuisance. For others, it can be a major problem that interferes with daily activities and may lead to a life-threatening asthma attack. Asthma can't be cured, but its symptoms can be controlled. Many people live long, healthy lives with asthma. Some blood pressure medications, like beta-blockers or aspirin, can interfere with your asthma treatment or make asthma worse. Your doctor can help you develop a plan to manage your asthma.

For tips to keep your lungs healthy, go to <http://www.lung.org/lung-health-and-diseases/protecting-your-lungs/>