



# CHRONIC LUNG DISEASE AND SHORTNESS OF BREATH

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information sheet

This information sheet is designed for people who experience chronic lung disease, including chronic bronchitis, emphysema, asthma, or a combination of these conditions. Your doctor may have used names like COAD (Chronic Obstructive Airways Disease) or COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease).

Since there are many different chronic lung diseases, this information sheet will deal with each condition separately.

## **Bronchitis**

Bronchitis causes redness and swelling of the small airways (inflammation). Swelling of the small airway lining may block the airway, making it harder to breathe. Excess mucus (which is easily infected by bacteria) is produced in the airways. This causes coughing and a lot of the mucus may be coughed up. This process can largely be reversed with treatment.

Most adults have a bout of acute or short-term bronchitis at some time in their lives. Normally this lasts a week or two at the most. People with chronic bronchitis produce a lot of mucus. They may experience symptoms of coughing and shortness of breath for months or even years.

## **Emphysema**

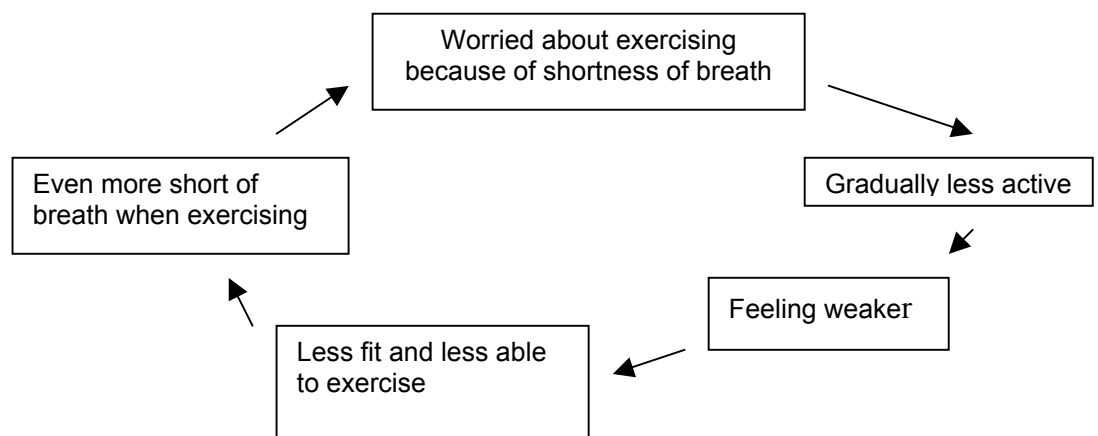
In emphysema, the air sacs in the lungs are gradually destroyed. This makes it difficult for the lungs to absorb enough oxygen from the air into the blood. As the air sacs are destroyed, the small airways lose their support and function. They become blocked and are no longer able to provide an adequate air supply. Emphysema cannot be reversed.

## **Asthma**

People with asthma have sensitive airways in their lungs. When exposed to certain triggers (e.g. pollens, dust), their airways narrow. This is due to inflammation, mucus production and tightening of the muscle around the airway. Medication can reverse the narrowing and inflammation of the airways and dry up the mucus in the lungs.

## **Diagnosis**

The doctor may order spirometry (a lung function test which measures breathing) and a chest x-ray to diagnose your problem. People often reduce their activities to lessen episodes of shortness of breath. A vicious cycle begins to develop, leading to less activity, a decreased fitness level and increased loss of lung function.



### **Tips to improve life if you are short of breath**

- Be well informed. Learn as much as you can about your condition and how you can manage it.
- Understand your medications and use them according to your doctor's advice.
- Discuss all your medications (prescription and over-the-counter) with your doctor and pharmacist to ensure they are compatible. Some medications taken for other conditions can make your shortness of breath worse.
- Quit smoking. Smoking contributes to the development and worsening of lung conditions. Call the Quitline on 131 848 for help and support.
- Exercise should be part of your daily routine. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist for advice on suitable activities.
- Breathing exercises, including breath control, can be helpful. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist for advice.
- Adequate nutrition is essential. Ask a dietitian for advice.
- Ensure that your general health is under control. Yearly influenza (flu) immunisation and/or every five years a pneumococcal immunisation are recommended.
- Oxygen therapy may be indicated for certain people. Ask your doctor.
- Join your local LungNet Support Group. Meeting people with similar problems and find out how they have managed to be in control

### **What to do in an asthma emergency: Use the 4-step asthma first aid**

1. Sit the person upright and give reassurance.
2. Without delay give 4 separate puffs of a reliever (*Airomir, Asmol, Bricanyl or Ventolin*). The medication is best given one puff at a time via a spacer device\*. Ask the person to take 4 breaths from the spacer after each puff of medication.
3. Wait 4 minutes.  
If there is little or no improvement repeat steps 2 and 3.
4. If there is still no improvement call an ambulance immediately (DIAL 000).
- 5.

Continuously repeat steps 2 and 3 while waiting for the ambulance  
**(\*Just use the puffer on its own if you don't have a spacer.)**

### **Further Information:**

- Contact your local doctor.
- Contact Asthma Victoria on 1800 130 645 or [www.asthma.org.au](http://www.asthma.org.au)
- LungNet 1800 654 301. (Note: LungNet support groups are not in all Australian states).
- The respiratory clinic at your major hospital

For further information contact your local doctor  
or call Asthma Victoria on 1800 645 130 or visit Asthma Victoria's website: [www.asthma.org.au](http://www.asthma.org.au)

*This resource satisfies the guidelines and standards approved by the National Asthma Council and Asthma Australia. The materials contained in this publication are distributed for information purposes only. Suitable medical and professional advice should be obtained before acting on any information contained herein.*

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