An exacerbation is a worsening or flare up of the signs of your lung disease. You need to know when your signs change to get the help you need as soon as you can. You may need to go to the hospital to get your signs under control.

**Changes to watch for**

Learn how you feel on a bad day and how you feel when you are having a flare up. Changes in the weather, altitude, emotions or allergies, or forgetting to use your inhaler can cause you to have a bad day. You may cough more, feel more shortness of breath or have more mucus on a bad day.

**The most common signs of a flare up include:**

- More problems breathing, even when you are resting.
- More wheezing or coughing.
- More mucus or the mucus looks different. Mucus may be more sticky or thicker than usual. It may go from clear to yellow or green, or you may see blood in it.
- Tightness or pain in your chest.
- Swelling in your hands or feet.
- Feeling sleepy, more tired or like you have no energy.
- Being confused, forgetting things or having trouble talking.
- Being irritable or anxious.

**Other changes you might have include:**

- Faster heart rate.
- Fever.
- Faster breathing rate.
- Fingers or lips are more blue or gray in color.
- Headaches, feeling dizzy or restless.
- The need to increase your oxygen if you are on oxygen.

Learn what signs you have when you have a flare up. Also teach your family and friends about your signs of a flare up. Sometimes your family and friends will notice changes in you before you notice them.

**Talk to your doctor to make a COPD action plan to deal with any flare ups.**

**Causes**

A lung infection is the most common cause of a flare up. The infection may be from a virus or a bacteria. Often it may start with a viral infection that can also cause more bacteria to grow to result in both types of infection.

Other causes may include:

- Cold or sinus infection.
- Air pollution.
- Other lung problems.
Have a COPD action plan

Work with your doctor to make a plan for how you should change your care to treat a flare up.

The plan may include:

• Changing the dose or how often you take a medicine you usually take.
• Adding a steroid medicine.
• Taking an antibiotic for a bacterial infection.
• Taking oxygen.
• When to call your doctor or go to the hospital.

Ways to reduce flare ups

You will not be able to prevent all flare ups, but you can reduce how often they occur and how serious they are.

Follow these tips:

• Wash your hands often, especially after you use the bathroom, before you eat or handle any food and after you sneeze or cough. Use water and soap and scrub for at least 15 seconds. Rinse with clean water and dry with a clean towel.
• Avoid people who have colds or any other infections.
• Get the flu vaccine each year. Talk with your doctor about also having a pneumonia vaccine.
• Take your medicines as ordered by your doctor to keep your lungs working as well as they can.

Things to avoid during a flare up

• Do not wait more than 24 hours to call your doctor if your signs continue or get worse.
• Do not smoke or use tobacco and avoid being around others who smoke.
• Do not take extra doses of theophylline, such as in Theo-dur or Senophylline. Taking more than your doctor ordered could cause serious problems.
• Do not take any cough suppressants or medicines with codeine.
• Do not use over the counter nasal sprays for more than 3 days.

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

The Library for Health Information is available to help you find more health information at (614) 293-3707 or e-mail: health-info@osu.edu.

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