Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

COPD is the overall term used to describe a variety of illnesses, including chronic bronchitis, emphysema and chronic obstructive airways disease. People with COPD have permanently damaged lungs and find it difficult to breathe most of the time. COPD usually affects people over the age of 40 years and it's the sixth most common cause of death in England and Wales, causing more than 30,000 deaths a year.

Causes

Smoking is to blame for COPD in the majority of cases. Smoke from cigarettes causes inflammation in the lungs and destroys the elasticity that allows the lungs to expand and contract as you breathe. Air pollution and polluted work conditions may cause some cases, or make the disease worse. However, people who have never smoked rarely develop COPD.

Symptoms

It is important to speak to your GP if you have any of the following symptoms.

- Early morning 'smoker's cough'
- Persistent coughing
- Mucus and phlegm
- Wheezing
- Tight chest
- Difficulty breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Recurring lung and chest infections

Treatment

There is no cure for COPD. Treatment is mainly used to relieve any symptoms that you may experience.

- **Bronchodilators** – if your main symptom is breathlessness, then you may benefit from a bronchodilator. A bronchodilator is an inhaler that delivers medicine to make your airways wider. There are different types of bronchodilators which work in different ways and they can

be of benefit if they are used together.
- **Nebulisers** – nebulisers can provide bigger doses of medicines but inhalers are just as effective. What you are given depends on how you respond to treatment.
- **Steroids** – if you become suddenly more short of breath and your symptoms get worse, you may be experiencing what is known as an 'exacerbation'. Your doctor may give you a short course of steroids for a few days. Some people take a steroid inhaler regularly but your doctor will decide if this is necessary for you.
- **Antibiotics** – if your phlegm changes colour, becomes stickier, or there is more of it, your doctor may give you a course of antibiotics.

Ways you can help to improve the symptoms of COPD

As well as treatments, there other ways you can help to improve the symptoms of COPD:

- **Stop smoking** – The best way to prevent COPD is not to smoke. If you are already a smoker, you should try to give up. If you do, the progress of COPD can be slowed down. If your symptoms are mild, then stopping smoking may be all that is needed. It is also important to avoid other people's smoke and smoky environments.
- **Do regular exercise** – This will help to strengthen your heart and lungs and improve your breathing. Try to do 20-30 minutes of exercise a day, 3-4 times per week. Losing weight can also be beneficial as extra weight can cause your breathlessness to worsen.
- **Eat a balanced diet** – This is very important for keeping your immune system healthy. Try to eat plenty of fruit and vegetables, but also reduce the amount of fat, sugar and salt in your diet.
- **Drink lots of fluids** – This will help to reduce the amount of mucus and phlegm in your throat and lungs. Water is particularly good.
- **Using a steam inhalator or humidifier** – This can be used at home and can help to reduce excess mucus and phlegm, but can also reduce the feeling of being 'blocked up' and being unable to breathe properly.

If you have COPD, you are at greater risk of catching other illnesses, such as influenza. You should therefore have an annual '**flu jab**' every autumn.

Local Help and Advice

The Newcastle Community CHEST Team can provide support and assessment for patients with COPD. The CHEST team provides three major services to patients: early supported discharge for COPD patients; home oxygen assessment and review; and the COPD Exacerbation Management at Home Service. For more information visit the Newcastle upon Tyne Hospital Trust website.

British Lung Foundation runs local exercise classes for people living with a lung condition and for those who look after them.

Other Useful Information

- **Patient Information Centre** has a range of easy to read **mental health self help guides** available to download for free. You can also find local mental health services on their website **www.cntw.nhs.uk.**
- **British Lung Foundation**
- **Healthtalk.org**
- For information and guidance on **improving your home to meet your needs better please visit the Housing section of Information Now website.**

> **Please note – The content on this website is provided for general information only, and should not be treated as a substitute for the medical advice of your own doctor or any other health care professional. If you are feeling unwell, make an appointment to see your GP or contact NHS 111. In an emergency, dial 999.**

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Useful Organisations

Patient Information Centre – Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW)

Website: www.cntw.nhs.uk

Telephone: 0191 246 7288

Address: St Nicholas Hospital, NE3 3XT

Newcastle upon Tyne Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Website: https://www.newcastle-hospitals.nhs.uk

Telephone: 0191 233 6161

Address: Freeman Hospital, NE7 7DN

healthtalk.org

Email: info@healthtalkonline.org

Website: www.healthtalk.org

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