

DISEASE FOCUS: COPD

Out of Breath

COPD: A hidden killer

OVER a million Australians live with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Australia's fifth biggest killer.

Often mistaken as old age, COPD slowly stops people from getting the air they need and prevents them from doing simple daily tasks like walking or looking after their family.

Australia is facing a COPD epidemic, particularly among women. Research shows nearly half of Australians with symptoms of COPD have not seen their doctor about it.

The Australian Lung Foundation (ALF), Australia's peak COPD body, urges Australians aged 45 or over who experience shortness of breath to speak with their doctor about a simple lung test. The call comes following research that shows one in six Australians aged 45 or over has some form of COPD.

While there is no cure, there are things people can do to breathe easier and improve their quality of life, particularly if it is identified and managed early.

"Many Australians aged 45 or over may have some evidence of airway obstruction," said Professor Peter Frith, chair of the Australian Lung Foundation's COPD Executive and Head of Respiratory Services at South Australia's Flinders Medical Centre and Repatriation General Hospital.

"While only a proportion of these people will go on to have very advanced disease, it should act as a warning sign for people to take action to prevent the disease from getting worse."

What is COPD?

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a long term disease of the lungs which causes shortness of breath. It is a group of disorders that includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

Do you:

- Cough several times most days?
- Bring up phlegm or mucus most days?
- Get out of breath more easily than others your age?
- Are you over 45 years old?
- Are you a smoker or ex-smoker?

If you answered yes to three or more of the above questions, speak to your doctor about a lung function test.

Professor Frith said an estimated one million people have COPD. It is Australia's fifth biggest killer, and the third leading cause of disease burden, after heart disease and stroke.

Medical specialists are becoming increasingly concerned about the impact of COPD upon women. Australian Lung Foundation research shows 20 per cent of women aged 45 or over are already displaying symptoms which suggest they may have COPD or another lung disease.

Carpe diem — seize the day is Bill's approach to living with COPD

Bill Scowcroft's inspirational story shows what a positive approach and effective treatment can achieve. He was admitted to his local hospital, in Winnipeg, Canada, in July 2001 with pneumonia, a complication caused by his COPD. His condition became so serious that he was not expected to live. After being hospitalised for five months, including four in isolation, Bill had lost 40 pounds (18 kg) and was so weak he could not push the TV remote control button.

Bill made the decision to gain control of his condition. His wife Caroline says he decided to "live with COPD, rather than die from it." He began a self-initiated exercise regime and pulmonary rehabilitation.

After two months he resumed full-time work as director of the Grain Research Laboratory for the Canadian Grain Commission, never taking a sick day before retiring at 66 and had no hospitalisations between 2001 and 2006.

Bill, who now lives in Canberra, continues to be very active despite being on permanent oxygen therapy. He exercises for 1–2 hours per day, eats nutritionally, enjoys gardening and playing in Scrabble tournaments. He writes about managing COPD and his professional interest in plant biotechnology and crop improvement.



“The Australian Lung Foundation research shows that nearly half of Australians with symptoms of COPD have not seen their doctor about it — that means they are not taking the crucial steps to limit its progress if they do have the condition,” said Professor Frith.

“Many people put off seeing their doctor because they mistake their symptoms for signs of ageing or a lack of fitness. It isn’t until simple actions such as going for a short walk become difficult that they realise their condition is more serious and consult their doctor,” said Professor Frith.

Professor Frith said COPD can be managed to help people breathe easier and improve quality of life if it is identified early and action is taken to prevent its progress.

“It isn’t normal to be short of breath — speak with your doctor if you are short of breath compared with others your age,” he said.

Associate professor Christine McDonald, respiratory physician at the Austin Hospital’s Department of Respiratory Medicine in Melbourne, said the main cause of COPD is smoking.

“Women may be at greater risk of developing COPD because they have smaller lungs and airways and more sensitive airways, causing them to develop COPD at lower smoking levels,” Associate professor McDonald said.

“It is very important that women are aware of the symptoms of COPD too. COPD has been traditionally seen as a male disease — however within a few years more women may die from it than men because of physical and environmental factors.”

Recent Australian research has also found that women may be at greater risk than men of COPD from occupational exposure to biological dust, common in many female dominated industries. Other risk factors include indoor and outdoor air pollution, environmental tobacco smoke, chest infections and some genetic predispositions. •

GSK supports the Australian Lung Foundation and supports research into better ways to manage COPD. GSK currently markets several innovative treatments that help to manage COPD symptoms.

Support available from The Australian Lung Foundation

To help support those with COPD and reduce the burden of the disease, the Australian Lung Foundation offers LungNet — a national network of patient support groups for people with COPD and other lung conditions.

LungNet groups provide an opportunity for people with COPD to meet others living with the condition, to learn more about it and to get involved with local LungNet activities.

People with COPD and their carers can contact the Australian Lung Foundation to find local support groups, to get information to help them understand and best manage their condition. For further information, help and support please call (free) on 1800 654 301 or visit www.lungnet.com.au



Call on healthcare professionals to be vigilant in identifying COPD symptoms in ex-smokers

The results of a survey commissioned by the Australian Lung Foundation reveal that 63 per cent of Australians with a history of smoking have never heard of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). In addition, the findings also show that a worrying proportion of ex-smokers would not be concerned if they experienced symptoms of COPD, despite people with a history of smoking being at significantly higher risk of developing the condition than those who have never smoked.

The survey, recently conducted by Newspoll, found:

- one in three (35 per cent) ex-smokers would not be worried if they experienced a persistent cough on most days;
- 20 per cent failed to express concern over developing an

ongoing productive cough (with phlegm); and

- 16 per cent of ex-smokers would not be concerned about experiencing shortness of breath more quickly than others their age.

“These findings are significant for healthcare professionals working with people with a history of smoking, because they illustrate that such patients are often unlikely to proactively raise worrying health issues,” said Professor Peter Frith.

“It is important for healthcare professionals to be proactive in identifying early symptoms of COPD such as breathlessness or an ongoing cough, as ex-smokers are at a higher risk of developing COPD than people who have never smoked, even if they may not recognise it.”