

Emphysema: Make Breathing Easier

Over one million Americans are forced to lead restricted lives because they have emphysema, a chronic lung condition. The air sacs (alveoli) in the lungs are destroyed, and the lung loses its elasticity, along with its ability to take in oxygen. Genetic factors are responsible for 3 to 5 percent of all cases of emphysema, and occupational and environmental exposure to irritants can also cause the disease. But the vast majority of people with emphysema are cigarette smokers aged 50 or older. In fact, emphysema is sometimes called the smoker's disease because of its strong link with cigarettes.

Emphysema takes a number of years to develop, and early symptoms can be easily missed.

Symptoms to look out for include:

- Shortness of breath on exertion. This gets worse over time.
- Wheezing.
- Fatigue.
- Repeated chest infections (colds and bronchitis).
- Slight body build with marked weight loss and a rounded chest that doesn't appear to expand when breathing in.

A doctor can diagnose emphysema based on your medical history, physical exam, a chest X-ray, and a lung function test (spirometry). By the time emphysema is detected, however, anywhere from 50 to 70 percent of your lung tissue may already be destroyed. At that point, your doctor may recommend the following:

- A program, medication, and/or nicotine replacement to help you stop smoking.
- Avoidance of dust, fumes, pollutants, and other irritating inhalants.
- Physical therapy to help loosen mucus in your lungs.
- Daily exercise.
- A diet that includes adequate amounts of all essential nutrients.
- Prescription medication (bronchodilators, corticosteroids, and antibiotics).
- Annual flu vaccinations.
- Pneumonia vaccination.

Emphysema is irreversible, however, so prevention is the only real way to avoid permanent damage.