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Asheville pulmonologist: Early intervention can lessen symptoms of COPD

November is COPD Awareness Month

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Written by **Dr. Daniel Fertel**
GUEST COLUMNIST

You've seen him in the grocery store, resting at the end of the aisle leaning on his cart to catch his breath.

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You may know her as the woman who struggles to mask her cough every Sunday during your pastor's sermon.

Maybe he's the favorite uncle whose loud breathing when he first sits down at the Thanksgiving table is a source of alarm to the rest of the family.

The chances are good that you will encounter someone with one or more of these symptoms — shortness of breath, coughing, and loud, high-pitched breathing — on a regular basis. If so, you are most likely seeing the signs of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD.

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COPD is the result of repeated injury to the lungs, nearly always from exposure to tobacco smoke. Initial symptoms are most often related to inflammation and irritation of the airways — the “smoker’s cough.” Over time, this injury may progress to scarring and associated loss of vital lung function — the ability to get oxygen into the bloodstream from air sacs in the lungs.

Because the symptoms of COPD often worsen gradually, patients may fail to notice as they get sicker and sicker. As a result, only 1 in 5 smokers is diagnosed with COPD despite studies showing that most smokers will go on to develop significant loss of lung function.

COPD is estimated to be the fourth leading cause of death in the United States, killing more than 120,000 individuals each year. Perhaps more importantly, because of its daily symptoms, living with COPD takes a tremendous toll on both the patient and society,



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resulting in associated time lost from work and increased health care costs.

However, if COPD is recognized and diagnosed early, appropriate treatment can prevent and decrease symptoms (especially breathlessness), reduce the frequency and severity of flare-ups, and prolong survival. Simple and painless breathing tests that can be performed by most primary care doctors are widely available and will confirm the diagnosis.

The most important interventions for a patient with COPD are quitting smoking and avoiding exposure to secondhand smoke. Quitting smoking, even when COPD is already present, has been shown to slow down worsening of lung function and may improve breathing. Inhalers can also have a significant effect on the day-to-day symptoms of patients with COPD and may lead to substantial improvements in shortness of breath. Most patients will require ongoing treatment to keep symptoms controlled even when they've stopped smoking.

If you suspect the signs of COPD — in your uncle, your neighbor, or yourself — ask your doctor if you should be tested. If you are a smoker and have been lucky enough to avoid symptoms of COPD, the best time to quit is now.

Dr. Daniel Fertel joined Asheville Pulmonary and Critical Care Associates in 2009 after completing his training at Duke University Medical Center. He holds board certifications in Pulmonary Medicine, Critical Care Medicine, and Internal Medicine and is a member of the WesternCarolina Medical Society.

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