

WELLNESSMONTHLY

Breathe Easy: Take Care of Your Respiratory Health | April 2021



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Breathe Easy: Take Care of Your Respiratory Health

Since the beginning of the pandemic we've been learning about ways infection by SARS-CoV-2, the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, affects the lungs.

Terms now familiar to non-clinicians include dyspnea (shortness of breath), acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), which causes fluid to leak into the lungs, and intubation, when a tube is inserted down the throat and connected to a ventilator to mechanically support breathing.

In some COVID-19 cases, infection decreases the supply of oxygen needed for the brain, organs and body tissues to function properly. Some people with

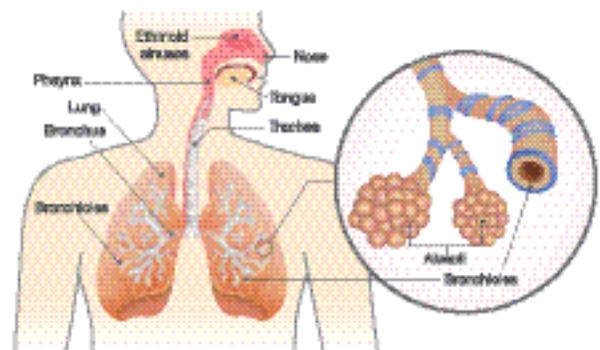
COVID-19 develop pneumonia, which inflames air sacs and may fill the lungs with fluid or pus.

Older people are more susceptible to pneumonia because lung capacity declines with age, and they may also have underlying health conditions. However, even healthy young people are at risk of serious illness or death when infection invades the lungs.

Lung Diseases

The average person takes between 17,280 and 23,040 breaths a day. Breathing involves a complex process, but most people breathe without conscious thought until their respiration rate goes up in response to exertion or stress, or they are having trouble breathing due to an acute or chronic condition.

Respiratory System:



Millions of Americans have lung diseases that affect their overall quality of life. Some conditions, such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), involve airways (the respiratory tract). When airways are affected, symptoms may include wheezing, shortness of breath, difficulty clearing out mucus or wet cough.

Asthma is believed to be caused by a combination of environmental and genetic factors. While not preventable, it is treatable. Public health officials say COPD is preventable because it is often caused by cigarette smoking. Progressive limitation of airflow associated with COPD is believed to be an inflammatory response to noxious particles or gases.

ARDS, pneumonia, emphysema, pulmonary edema, tuberculosis, pneumoconiosis (linked to inhaling coal dust or asbestos particles) and lung cancer are associated with damaged alveoli, the air sacs comprising lung tissue. Some lung diseases affect the lining between alveoli, while others directly impact blood vessels, resulting in blood clots (deep vein thrombosis) and contributing to high blood pressure. In some instances disease damages the pleura surrounding the lungs or chest wall.

Your Respiratory Health

According to the [American Lung Association](#), your body has a natural defense system designed to protect the lungs. There are a number of ways to protect your respiratory health, including all the steps recommended to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 – wearing a mask, keeping 6 feet apart, avoiding crowds, frequently washing hands, covering coughs and sneezes, and getting vaccinated.

Here are some additional tips:

Don't Smoke

Cigarette smoke can narrow air passages and cause chronic inflammation (swelling) in the lungs. Over time cigarette smoke destroys lung tissue and can trigger changes that grow into cancer. Exposure to second-hand smoke is hazardous to the health of non-smokers.

Avoid Exposures

Always wear recommended respiratory protection equipment. Substances known to increase risk of lung cancer include asbestos, arsenic, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, nickel, soot and tar. Air pollution also increases your exposure risk. Check the local air quality index before exercising outdoors. Avoid rigorous outdoor activity on high-index days and when air is polluted by smoke from wildfires.

Detect Radon

Radon is a naturally occurring gas that can get trapped in houses and buildings. It cannot be seen, tasted or smelled, but it can be detected with a device. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, external radon causes about 20,000 cases of lung cancer a year, making it the second leading cause of lung cancer after tobacco smoke.

Get Regular Check-ups

Regular medical check-ups are a key prevention strategy. This is especially true for lung disease, which may otherwise not be discovered until it is advanced. A work-related medical exam or personal health assessment may include spirometry, a pulmonary function test to measure lung capacity. Spirometry is used in workplace medical surveillance programs to evaluate employees' respiratory health over time. A personal physician may recommend a spirometry test to diagnose COPD, asthma and other respiratory conditions.

Stay Fit

Moderate physical activity will help you stay physically fit and develop resistance to "invaders" such as viruses, bacteria and fungi that can infect your lungs. Aerobic activities like walking, jogging, swimming or riding a bicycle give your heart and lungs the kind of workout they need to efficiently function. Muscle-strengthening activities like weight-lifting or Pilates build core strength, improve posture and tone breathing muscles. [Breathing exercises](#) help strengthen your diaphragm and train your body to breathe more deeply.

Nurture Yourself

Good nutrition, getting enough sleep, managing stress and staying hydrated promote overall wellness. If you snore or have other issues with breathing while you are asleep, get an evaluation for sleep apnea.

Seasonal Allergies

Now that spring is here, you may notice the return of seasonal allergies. Common symptoms include sneezing, runny or stuffy nose, fatigue, and itchy, watery eyes. In some cases, allergic reactions can trigger or exacerbate asthma.

When allergy symptoms affect your quality of life and productivity, consult a medical professional. An allergy test may be recommended to identify the source(s) so a targeted response can be developed. Some people get allergy shots to reduce symptoms and desensitize themselves to allergens over time.

Refer to WorkCare's Fact Sheet on [Recognizing and Managing Allergy Symptoms](#)