



# Age Healthier Breathe Easier

*Information for Older Adults and Their Families*

**D**id you know that environmental hazards can make it harder to breathe if one suffers from

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or asthma? The following are useful solutions to control environmental factors that can worsen these conditions. As people age, they are more likely to develop breathing problems caused by lung diseases. By knowing what can cause or set off an asthma attack, or other breathing problems, you may be able to protect yourself and your loved ones.

## What in the Environment Can Make it Harder to Breathe?

Breathing problems can occur if you smoke or are around tobacco smoke. Other environmental hazards can also make it hard to breathe, such as breathing dust and fumes at work or in the home, and breathing outdoor air pollutants.

The principal types of outdoor air pollution that can worsen breathing problems include:

- **Particle pollution:** Particle pollution comes from car and truck exhaust, emissions from factories, power plants, and construction site dust.
- **Ozone:** Ozone is a gas created when pollutants emitted by cars, power and chemical plants, and other sources, react chemically with sunlight.

Breathing problems can also be caused by indoor air pollution:

- Smoke from tobacco and wood-burning stoves
- Fumes created when coal, oil, kerosene, or gas are burned
- Fumes from household cleaning products and products used to kill bugs or rodents, and other products that make odors (paints, wax, hobby products and cosmetics, fragrances, and gasoline fumes)
- Dust mites (tiny bugs) and cockroaches
- Pet dander (skin flakes, saliva and urine from animals that can cause an allergic reaction such as sneezing or wheezing)
- Mold and dust

## What are the Main Types of Lung Diseases?

**COPD** may be caused by chronic bronchitis or emphysema. A person's lungs with COPD cannot take in or force out enough air. People with COPD get short of breath, tire easily, cough a lot and feel tight in the chest. Their lungs also produce too much mucus. As COPD becomes more serious, people may be unable to walk up steps or do daily tasks such as fixing meals. COPD gets worse over time and cannot be cured. About 119,000 people die of this disease each year. Many die at a younger age than the aver-

*COPD is the 4th leading cause of death in the United States. In 2000, COPD led to 726,000 hospital stays and 1.5 million emergency room visits.<sup>1</sup>*

*More than two million people age 65 years and older have asthma. In 2001, more than 860,000 older adults had an asthma episode or attack.<sup>2</sup>*

## How Can You Protect Yourself and Your Loved Ones?

If you have symptoms of lung disease, see a doctor right away. Symptoms include coughing up lots of mucus; feeling short of breath; and having a pain in your chest.

You and your health care provider can work out a plan for taking care of your symptoms with medicine. Your health care provider may also advise you about what to do. In addition, you can take steps to avoid being exposed to things that can cause or worsen lung problems.

- Avoid tobacco smoke and smoke from wood-burning stoves
- Clean your house to get rid of mold, dust mites, and cockroaches
- Keep pets out of places where you sleep
- Check your furnace, heating units, and stove every year for gas leaks and be sure they are free of mold
- Clean humidifier and air conditioner filter to be sure they are free of mold
- Fix water leaks right away to keep mold from growing and cockroaches away
- Open a window or door when using strong cleaning products, paint, or bug spray so the fumes will not build up indoors
- Check the Air Quality Index by visiting [www.epa.gov/airnow](http://www.epa.gov/airnow) and follow the advice about staying indoors. Some newspaper, television, and radio weather reports also carry the Air Quality Index.

age American. Each year, our nation spends about \$32 million to care for people with COPD.

**Asthma** makes it hard for people to breathe at certain times. The difference between asthma and COPD is that asthma can usually be treated. During an asthma attack, a person may cough very hard and struggle to get air. Medicine in a spray bottle called an inhaler can open up the lungs.

### What Is EPA's Aging Initiative?

To help older adults enjoy a longer and healthier life, the EPA developed the Aging Initiative. To learn more about the Aging Initiative and environmental factors that can affect your health, visit [www.epa.gov/aging](http://www.epa.gov/aging). You can download a poster with information about COPD and asthma called "Age Healthier, Breathe Easier."

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Initiative



### End Notes

1. National Institute on Heart, Lung and Blood, NIH, U.S. DHHS, Mortality and Morbidity Chartbook 2002 on Cardiovascular, Lung and Blood Diseases.
2. National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. DHHS, Summary Health Statistics for U.S. Adults, National Health Interview Survey, 2001.