



Waiting to exhale

COPD is a nasty pulmonary disease—and HIV-positive smokers are particularly susceptible *by Ashley Smith*

Smoking is notorious for its negative affects on your health, and it's implicated in a variety of diseases in the lungs and throughout the body. One of those diseases is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), best described as a group of diseases characterized by an obstruction to airflow when breathing out. It's the fourth leading cause of death worldwide—and it's persistently under diagnosed.

COPD is actually an umbrella term for chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and other lung disorders. The obstruction or limitation of airflow is due to thick secretions lining the tubes leading to the lungs, as well as a loss of the elastic ability of the lung tissue. That means air can't move from the lungs to the mouth and out, since the secretions cause narrowing in the passageway and the tissue is too floppy to snap back into place.

Signs and symptoms of COPD are different for everyone, however shortness of breath, increased chest secretions, coughing and wheezing, are common. The condition is diagnosed through spirometry, or breathing tests conducted at a doctor's office or in a pulmonary function laboratory in the hospital. It's

reversible at early stages—in fact, you can slow and even stop the progression of the disease by stopping smoking—but damage becomes permanent as lung changes begin to occur. COPD is treated with inhalers such as Ventolin and Atrovent.

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A recent study, reported in an issue of the journal *Chest*, showed a strong relationship between HIV and COPD. The research showed that HIV-positive smokers were almost 50 percent more likely to have COPD than their seronegative counterparts. The study didn't address the reason for the correlation; however, the researchers questioned the role of bacterial pneumonia, as it was more common in HIV-positive smokers with COPD than with HIV-positive smokers without COPD.

Did the lung injury due to the bacterial infection lead to the COPD? Or does COPD lead to the pneumonia? Researchers couldn't draw any conclusions about the causation; however, they did notice an association with bacterial lung infection and the development of COPD in seropositive smokers.

This study once again highlights the importance of beginning a smoking cessation program. Quitting smoking can be a daunting task, however research shows that the more you attempt to kick the habit, the more likely you are to quit some day. ☉

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For more information on quitting smoking

Great information on lung health and smoking cessation is available on the Canadian Lung Association's website at www.lung.ca.