



COPD: A lung disease more common than many cancers



Dr. Roger Goldstein
PHOTO: SID TABAK

There are no special events to end it, no widespread appearance of awareness ribbons, and no massive marathons devoted to its research. Yet Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is the fourth leading cause of death and quickly moving into third place.

People are at a much greater risk of developing this breath-restricting disease than congestive heart failure, acute heart attack, and several common cancers. Although COPD, which includes chronic bronchitis and emphysema, can't be cured, there is hope for people suffering from the illness.

Breathless, not helpless

As many as twenty percent of adults with known risk factors are unknowingly suffering from COPD. People with COPD "may be breathless but they are not helpless," says respirologist Dr. Roger Goldstein of West Park Healthcare Centre. Specialized rehabilitative programs can

help COPD patients learn how to live independently with the disease and slow its progress.

Symptoms can include shortness of breath, frequent coughs or chest infections that last longer than expected. Simple testing can be done even before symptoms appear. "High risk people (smokers over the age of 40) should be actively screened, so that COPD can be caught earlier and better managed," says Dr. Goldstein. A simple blowing test can be administered by your family physician or by referral.

Some basic advice to keep you breathing easy:

- Don't smoke. As high as 98 percent of COPD diagnoses are related to smoking.
- If you smoke, quit.
- If you have lung disease, including asthma, learn about what triggers your ailment and do your best to steer clear.
- Learn about your medications, including how and when to use them.
- Recognize the signs of a flare-up. Early intervention with medication or support from a family physician could help to avoid an emergency room visit.
- Stay fit and active.
- Get the flu shot.

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