

Exacerbations

Recognizing and Treating COPD Flare-Ups



COPD
FOUNDATION

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WHAT IS AN EXACERBATION?

People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) will sometimes experience flare-ups we call exacerbations. An exacerbation is a change from your normal condition because of a lung infection. During an exacerbation, it is harder to breathe. You may also have a cough, chest tightness, tiredness, or wheezing.

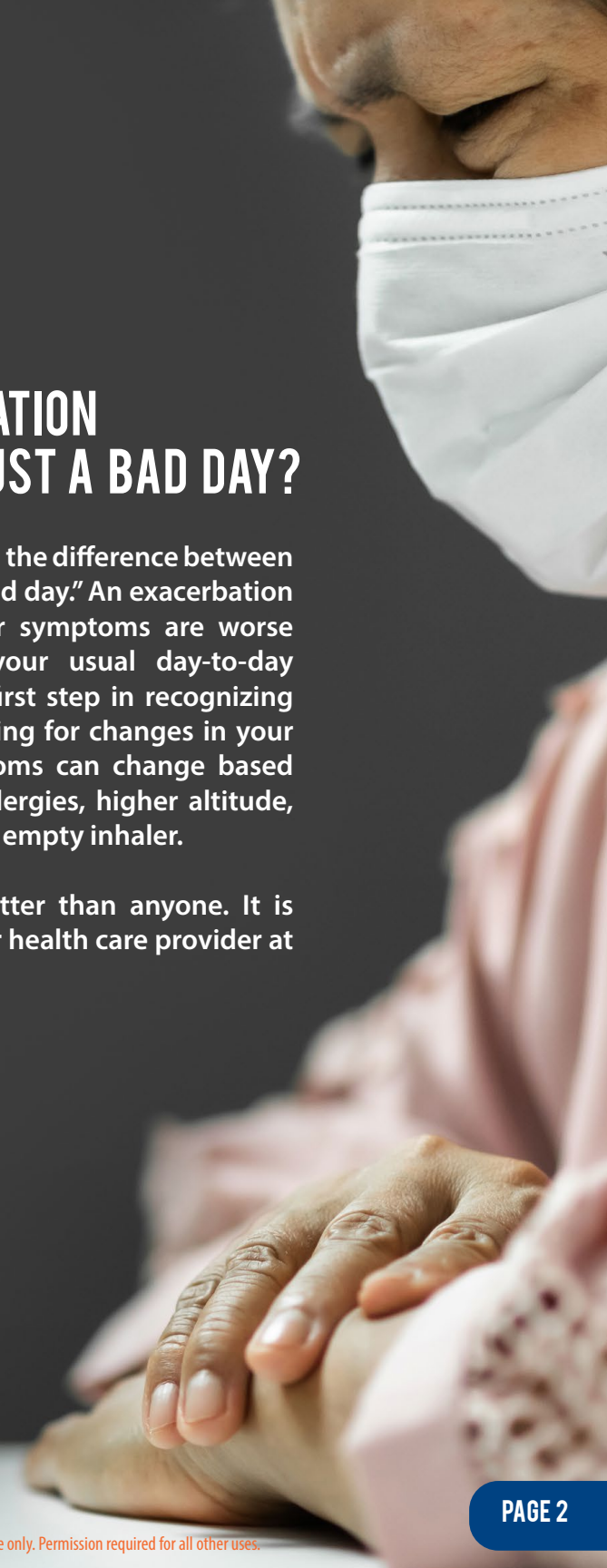
All COPD exacerbations are important. Sometimes you may have to go to the emergency room or stay in the hospital overnight. It's important to watch for the early warning signs of an exacerbation so that you can catch the flare-up early and possibly stop it from getting worse. In this guide, you will learn more about what exacerbations may look like so that you can act quickly.



IS IT AN EXACERBATION OR JUST A BAD DAY?

Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between a COPD flare-up and a “bad day.” An exacerbation or flare-up is when your symptoms are worse and last longer than your usual day-to-day changes. Therefore, the first step in recognizing an exacerbation is watching for changes in your symptoms. COPD symptoms can change based on weather, emotions, allergies, higher altitude, exercise, or even using an empty inhaler.

You know your body better than anyone. It is important to contact your health care provider at the first sign of a flare-up.



EARLY WARNING SIGNS OF EXACERBATION






Warning signs for flare-ups can look different for each person with COPD. It is important to find out what your own flare-ups look like. If you've had a recent flare-up, think about how it looked and felt. What kinds of symptoms did you notice at the beginning of your illness? Listed below are some common early warning signs of an flare-up.

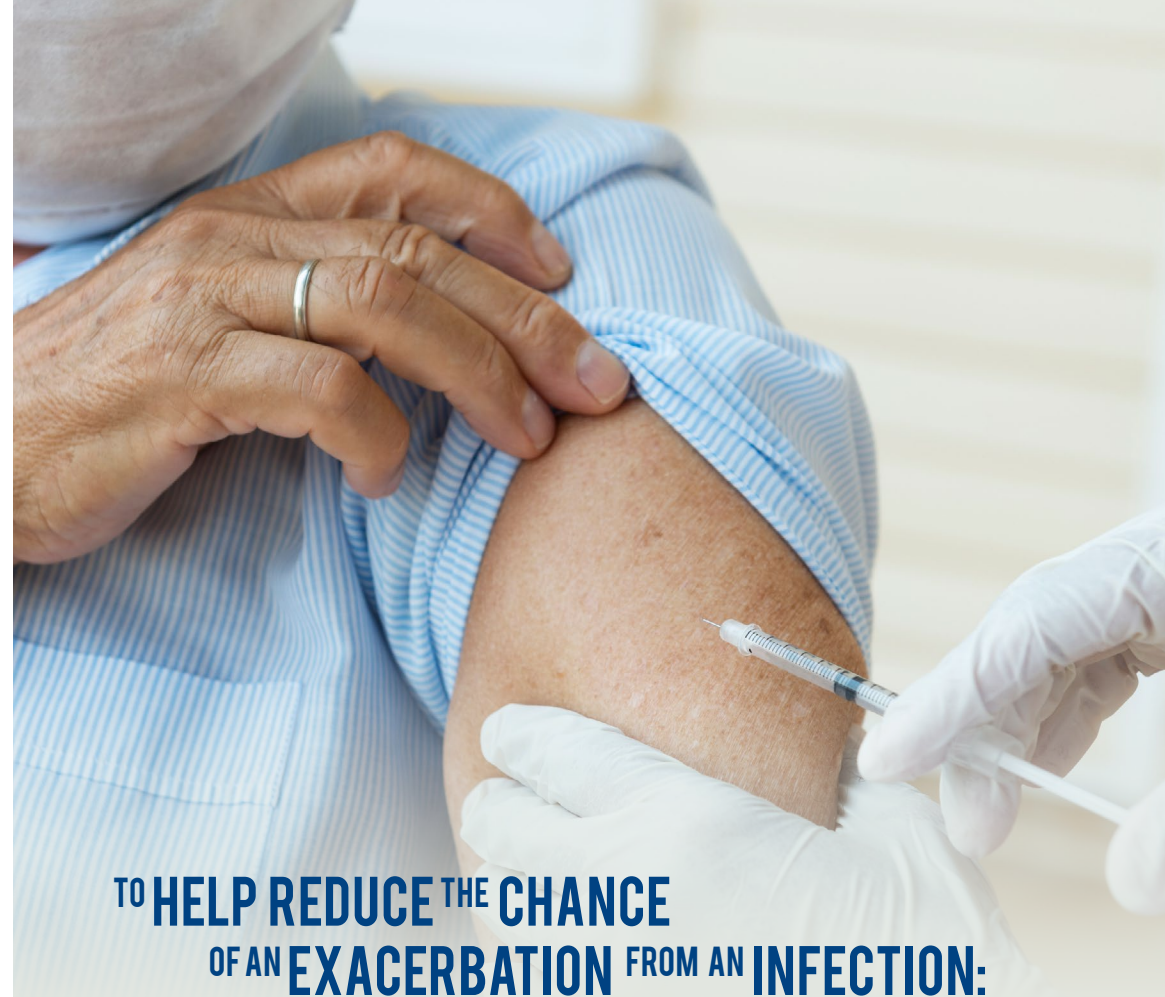
- ☐ Fever
- ☐ Using rescue (quick relief) medications more often than usual
- ☐ A change in the color, thickness, or amount of mucus you're coughing up
- ☐ Unusual tiredness
- ☐ New or worsening swelling in your legs and ankles
- ☐ More wheezing, coughing, or shortness of breath than usual
- ☐ Morning headaches or dizziness
- ☐ Feeling like your heart is racing or pounding

If you use oxygen, you may find that you need more oxygen than usual.

Sometimes your symptoms may be a sign of a more serious condition or more severe flare-up.

Call 911 or your local emergency services if you have:

-  Severe shortness of breath or chest pain.
-  Lips or fingers that look blue or unusually pale.
-  Confusion, disorientation, or slurring of speech.



TO HELP REDUCE THE CHANCE OF AN EXACERBATION FROM AN INFECTION:

- Wash your hands often and avoid being around people who are sick.
- Get a flu shot and a pneumonia shot (ask your health care provider about these important vaccinations).
- Always take your maintenance (controller) and rescue medicines as prescribed by your health care provider. Don't stop taking them when you feel well. They are helping you manage your COPD.
- Fill out the My COPD Action Plan with your health care provider. This is a plan you can follow if you are having an flare-up. A sample plan is available on the COPD Foundation website at copdf.co/my-copd-action-plan

HAVE A PLAN FOR AVOIDING AND TREATING EXACERBATIONS

A written action plan is an important part of your care. Your My COPD Action Plan is broken into sections. Your health care provider will give you instructions to follow for each section. The sections are color coded like a traffic light:



Red means Stop! Follow the steps in your action plan, use your medications as instructed, and call your health care provider right away. You may need to call 911 or your local emergency services if you are in the red section and are having severe COPD symptoms.

Yellow means slow down, a flare-up may be coming, so follow the steps in your action plan.

Green means stable or good.

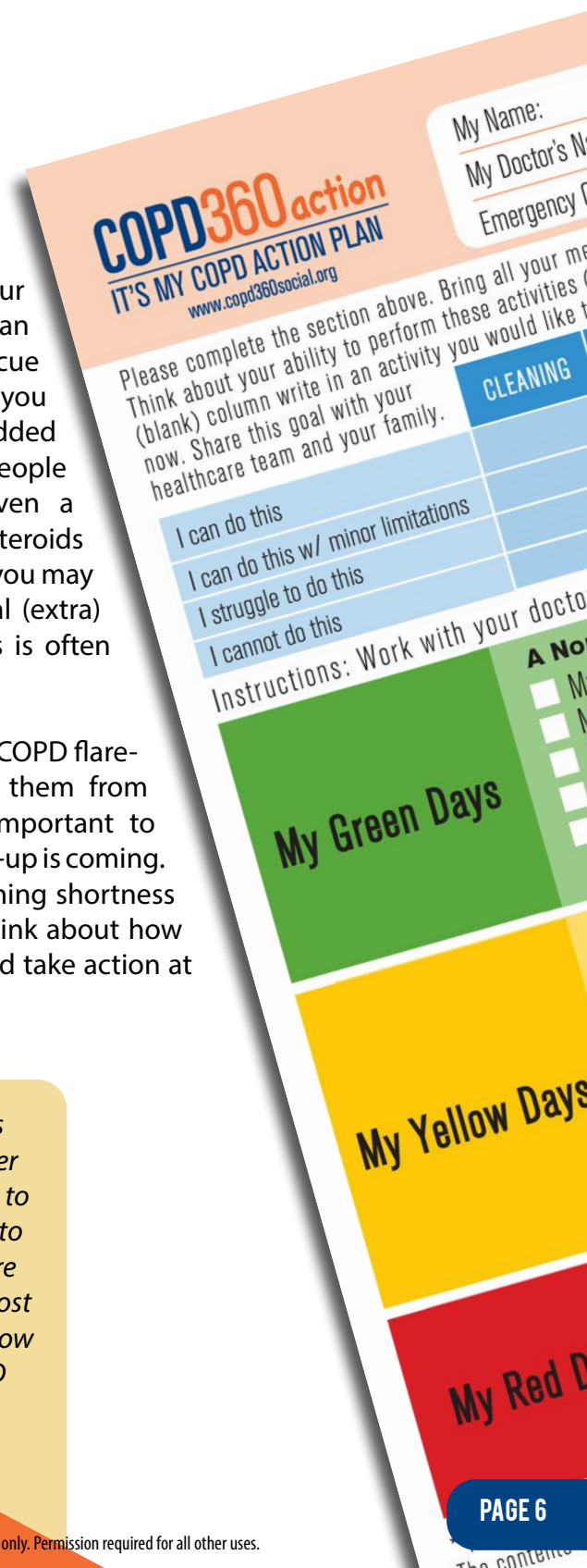
You and your health care provider should fill out your My COPD Action Plan together. It should be updated at least every six months.

DURING AN EXACERBATION

During a flare-up, follow your My COPD Action Plan. Your plan may include taking your rescue medications more often or you may have more medications added to your daily plan. Usually, people with COPD flare-ups are given a prescription for oral corticosteroids and antibiotics. In some cases, you may also need to use supplemental (extra) oxygen during a flare-up. This is often temporary.

While you can't always avoid a COPD flare-up, you can help to prevent them from becoming worse. It is very important to watch for early signs that a flare-up is coming. Look for symptoms like worsening shortness of breath, cough, and fever. Think about how your breathing usually feels and take action at the first sign of a change.

*No one knows
your body better
than you! Listen to
your body, talk to
your health care
provider, and most
importantly, follow
your My COPD
Action Plan.*



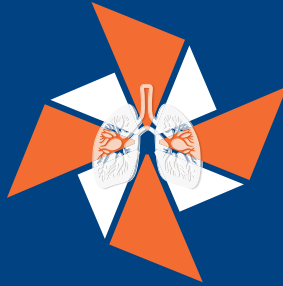


Learn more about COPD exacerbations on the COPD Foundation's website at www.copdfoundation.org

For information designed to help you manage your COPD and thrive with this condition, please visit The COPD Foundation Guides for Better Living at copdf.co/guides Click on “register” for free access.

To hear more about what others with COPD are saying about oxygen use, visit the COPD Foundation's online community, COPD360social at www.copd360social.org

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COPD360 Community Support Line:
1-866-316-COPD (2673)

Bronchiectasis and NTM Information Line:
1-833-411-LUNG (5864)

This guide has been reviewed by members of the
COPD Foundation Guides for Better Living Review Team