



## **Women and COPD**

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) includes two types of lung disease: emphysema and chronic bronchitis. It causes difficulty breathing and shortness of breath due to airflow blockage, which means breathing may take extra effort. COPD is the third leading cause of death in the United States and the prevalence of COPD from 1998 to 2009 was higher in women than in men. From 2007 to 2009, 7.4 million women had COPD compared with 4.4 million men.

### **Why do more women get COPD than men?**

Research suggests women are at a greater risk of developing COPD than men. Women have smaller airways, so it is possible they develop COPD from lower levels of smoking and other exposures than men.

Other studies report that risk factors, symptoms, disease progression and even diagnosis are different in women than in men. One of the major gender differences in COPD patients is that women get more airway obstruction whereas men tend to develop COPD with more emphysema-like symptoms. The reason for this is unclear.

### **How are COPD risk factors different for women than men?**

Women are more likely than men to develop COPD from their exposure to risk factors such as cigarette smoke. Also, studies show that women who smoke have a harder time than men quitting and staying tobacco-free.

Because COPD can develop over decades, a large number of the current cases can be traced back to the 1950s when there was a dramatic rise in smoking among women.

Women may be more likely to get COPD from their exposures, but they also make up the greatest number of COPD patients who have never smoked. Because of this, women may have gender-linked genetic factors that predispose them to developing the disease.

### **How do women experience COPD differently than men?**

Women are less likely to be correctly diagnosed or offered appropriate diagnostic tests for COPD. In research that investigated whether doctors show bias against diagnosing the disease in women, COPD was the most probable diagnosis more often for men than women. Also, in a survey of COPD patients, women were less likely than men to have been offered breathing function tests.

Women with COPD report more severe shortness of breath, anxiety and depression. Some studies report that women with COPD have a lower health-related quality of life score than men.

Regardless of whether you have ever smoked, if you are a woman with difficulty breathing, you should see your health care provider and ask for breathing tests. The earlier COPD is diagnosed the more action you can take to prevent it from worsening.