COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease)

What is COPD?
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) refers to a large group of lung diseases that damage the lungs, making it hard to breathe. In COPD, the airway tubes that carry air in and out of your lungs are partly obstructed, making it difficult for air to flow. Most people with COPD have emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

With emphysema, the walls between many tiny air sacs are destroyed, leading to a few large air sacs. Healthy lungs look like a sponge with many tiny, evenly spaced holes. Emphysema destroys the walls between air sacs leaving the lungs more like a sponge with large bubbles. The smaller number of large air sacs have less surface area than many smaller air sacs. That smaller surface area leads to a poor balance exchange of oxygen and CO₂ causing shortness of breath.

With chronic bronchitis, your lung airways become inflamed and thickened with an increase in the number and size of mucus-producing cells. This results in excessive mucus production, which contributes to coughing and difficulty breathing.

COPD in Kentucky
Each day, approximately 150 Kentuckians are hospitalized for respiratory diseases including COPD. In 1997, the state’s COPD death rate was the fifth highest in the nation. In Kentucky, COPD is more prevalent in women and the elderly.

Symptoms
A cough that doesn’t go away and coughing up mucus, common symptoms of COPD, often occur years before breathing becomes difficult. However, not everyone with a cough and mucus production develops COPD, and not everyone with COPD has a cough. Wheezing and chest tightness are also symptoms, along with shortness of breath, especially while exercising.

What Causes COPD?
Long-term and heavy smoking is the most frequent cause of COPD. Approximately 80 to 90 percent of COPD deaths are caused by smoking. However, asthma, exposure to air pollutants in the home and workplace and a history of respiratory infections are also causes of COPD. Age and genetic factors also play a role in the development of COPD.

Diagnosing and Treating COPD
Although there are no tests to detect COPD in early stages, there are several ways health providers can evaluate patients for COPD. A simple test can be used to measure lung function and detect COPD. A spirometry (sph-er-o-meh-tree) test can confirm a diagnosis of COPD. This test is easy, painless and determines how well your lungs work.

Treatment of COPD requires a careful and thorough evaluation by a physician. The most important aspect of treatment is avoiding tobacco smoke and removing other air pollutants from the home or workplace. Although there is no cure for COPD, lifestyle changes and medical treatment can help people manage their symptoms and improve their quality of life.
Facts about COPD

• COPD is the fourth leading cause of death in America and in Kentucky, claiming the lives of 2,140 Kentuckians in 2002.

• COPD is a major cause of death and disability in the United States and in Kentucky.

• Smoking is the primary risk factor for COPD. Female smokers are nearly 13 times as likely to die from COPD as women who have never smoked. Male smokers are nearly 12 times as likely to die from COPD as men who have never smoked.

• It is believed that COPD is severely under-diagnosed and as many as 25 million adults may have COPD.

To Find Out More:

UK HealthCare COPD Clinic
Appointments and information
(800) 333-8874
www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu
Offers complete evaluation, diagnosis and clinical management of all lung and respiratory disorders. Services include pulmonary function testing, evaluation of lung disease, COPD, asthma, infectious lung disease, drug-related pulmonary disorders, and carcinoma of the lung.

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
Part of National Health Institute
(301) 592 8573
www.nhlbi.nih.gov
Offers materials about lung diseases and programs to quit smoking.

National Lung Health Education Program
(972) 910-8555
www.nlhep.org
Dedicated to the prevention of lung disease and the promotion of lung health.

American Lung Association
(800) 586-4872
www.lungusa.org
Offers resources for lung disease diagnosis and treatment, and information on how to quit smoking.