

Emphysema

Emphysema is a form of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

It can be due to a genetic condition such as alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency. However, most cases are related to smoking or long-term exposure to dust or pollutants which damage the air sacs in the lungs. This is where oxygen enters the bloodstream. The symptoms develop slowly, generally over many years, and include shortness of breath, fatigue, cough and phlegm and recurrent chest infections. In more advanced cases, there can be cyanosis (a blue colouration) of the skin.

There is no cure for emphysema, but it is largely preventable. The most important one being not smoking or quitting if you do smoke. Talk to your doctor about ways to achieve this. Even if you have failed before, it does not matter. Some people need multiple attempts before finally getting off cigarettes.

Diagnosis is based on the history and examination of the chest. You will likely be referred for imaging of the chest (x-ray or CT scan) and lung function testing. Complications include pneumonia and collapsing of the lung.

Treatment is designed to minimise symptoms. This includes inhalers to widen airways and reduce sputum, lung rehabilitation programs, quitting smoking, exercise to increase lung capacity (this needs to be gentle), and in advanced cases, oxygen may be helpful. It is important to have an annual flu vaccination and to see your doctor at the first sign of any respiratory infection.

It is worth restating that whilst there is no cure for emphysema, it can be largely prevented by not smoking. If you do smoke, talk to your doctor about quitting.



More info >>

