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WHAT IS COPD?

COPD, or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease is a progressive disease that makes it hard to breathe. "Progressive" means the disease gets worse over time. COPD can cause coughing that produces large amounts of mucus (o slimy substance), wheezing, shortness of breath, chest tightness, and other symptoms.

To understand COPD, it helps to understand how the lungs work. The air that you breathe goes down your windpipe into tubes in your lungs called bronchial tubes or airways

Within the lungs, your bronchial tubes branch into thousands of smaller, thinner tubes called bronchioles. These tubes end in bunches of tiny round air sacs called alveoli.

Small blood vessels called capillaries run through the walls of the air sacs. When air reaches the air sacs, oxygen passes through the air sac walls into the blood in the capillaries. At the same time, carbon dioxide (a waste gas) moves from the capillaries into the air sacs. This process is called gas exchange.

The airways and air sacs are elastic (stretchy). When you breathe in, each air sac fills up with air like a small balloon. When you breathe out, the air sacs deflate and the air goes out.

In COPD, less air flows in and out of the airway because of the one or more of the following:

- The airways and the air sacs lose their elastic.
- The walls between many of the air sacs are destroyed.
- The walls of the airways become thick and inflamed.
- The airways make more mucus than usual, which can clog them.

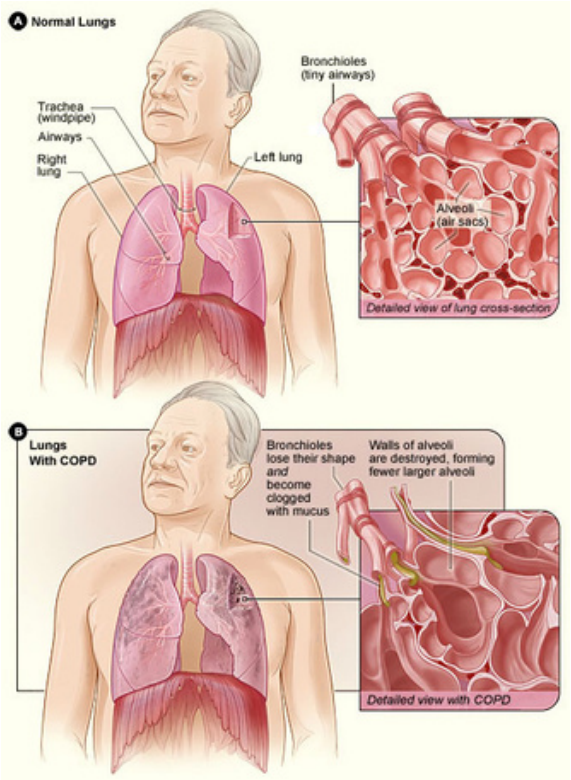


Figure A shows the location of the lungs and airways In the body. The inset image shows a detailed cross-section of the bronchioles and alveoli.

Figure B shows lungs damaged by COPD. The inset image shows a detailed cross-section of the damaged bronchioles and alveolar walls.

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