

What if there was a disease that affected more than 30 million people in the country, but only about 16 million of them know it? What if I told you that that disease was the fourth leading cause of death in the United States? It isn't cancer. Or heart disease. It is COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease). Maybe you have heard of COPD, but don't know exactly what it is or what it looks like. Maybe you have been told you have COPD and need more information to help you manage your symptoms. I want you to know there are things you can learn and habits you can put into practice to help you breathe better and be stronger in your everyday life.

Let's start with the basics. COPD is a serious lung disease that progresses slowly over time, making it very difficult to breathe. You may also have heard it called by other names. In fact, we used to just call this emphysema and chronic bronchitis, but they are actually forms of COPD. Most people believe that only smokers get COPD, but that is just not true. Approximately 25% of people with COPD have NEVER smoked in their lives.

We know that sometimes people live with the symptoms of COPD for a long time before they ever go to the doctor to find out what is wrong. Some of the most common symptoms are increased breathlessness, frequent coughing (with and without sputum), wheezing, and tightness in the chest. Many times, people have been experiencing symptoms and just ignore them, or quit doing the activities that make their symptoms worse. You can imagine how this is – when someone gets short of breath going up the stairs or bending over to tie their shoes, they will *quit* going up stairs and they will buy shoes they can just slip on. They sometimes think this is just part of the aging process and don't ask their doctor about these symptoms. This is part of the reason we are trying to raise awareness. If we can get people to go to their doctor and report the symptoms we mentioned above, they can be diagnosed earlier, and treatment can begin sooner.

One of the best things to help with the treatment of COPD is exercise. There are actually pulmonary rehab programs designed to help people with breathing difficulties learn about the disease and how to start exercising to improve stamina and endurance. The benefits of these programs are tremendous and have lasting results.

There are other resources and treatments that can really help someone living with COPD. The COPD Foundation is a non-profit organization that wants to help improve the lives of those affected by COPD. They have helpful information and an online social community on their website (www.copdfoundation.org) and will even send educational materials to your home at no cost to you. In case you aren't online, you can call 1-866-731-COPD (2673) to get more information.

Remember – early detection is key, and you are not alone!