

Survey: Awareness of COPD is rising, but understanding is still low

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Awareness of COPD—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease—continues to grow in the United States, according to national survey results released today by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI) of the National Institutes of Health.

Sixty-eight percent of adults are now aware of COPD, a disease that affects 1 in 5 people over age 45, compared with 64 percent last year, and 49 percent in a 2004 survey. Among a high risk group, those who are currently smoking, awareness rose to 74 percent compared to 69 percent a year ago.

Less than half of all adults, 44 percent, understand that the disease can be treated. November is National COPD Awareness Month.

"Awareness is an important first step," said James P. Kiley, Ph.D., director, NHLBI Division of Lung Diseases. "However, awareness alone is not enough. People at risk of developing the disease need to know what the disease looks and feels like, and most importantly, to understand that it can be treated. The key is to get tested and start treatment as soon as possible."

COPD, which is sometimes referred to as [chronic bronchitis](#) or [emphysema](#), is a serious [lung disease](#) affecting 24 million men and women in the United States. However, half of them remain undiagnosed despite recognizable symptoms such as shortness of breath while doing activities that used to be easy, wheezing, or chronic cough (sometimes

called a "smoker's cough.") Eight out of 10 cases of COPD are due to smoking, typically affecting those over 40. The remaining cases are due to genetics or other environmental exposures.

The survey showed that physicians maintain an optimistic view about COPD treatability. Approximately 9 out of 10 primary care physicians agree that available treatments can optimize quality of life for their patients with COPD. However, the survey also showed that this message may not be familiar to their patients.

Symptoms of COPD were approximately two times more common among current smokers than former smokers, but current smokers are only half as likely to talk to their doctors about these symptoms. Survey results also showed that 41 percent of current [smokers](#) do not talk to their doctors about these symptoms because they do not want to hear another quit smoking message.

COPD is diagnosed with a simple noninvasive breathing test called spirometry, which can be conducted in a doctor's office. Taking the test involves breathing hard and fast into a tube connected to a machine which measures the total amount of air exhaled, called the forced vital capacity or FVC, and how much air is exhaled in the first second, called the forced expiratory volume in one second or FEV1.

"We know that for many people, taking the step to talk to a doctor about their smoking and symptoms is difficult," said Kiley. "But these actions, including testing of lung function, should be seen as proactive for better health."

The NHLBI analyzed the results of the annual HealthStyles and DocStyles surveys of the public health attitudes, knowledge, practices, and lifestyle habits of consumers and health care professionals, conducted each year by Porter Novelli, communications contractor for

NHLBI's COPD Learn More Breathe Better campaign. The results represent a sample of 4,172 consumers through a mailed survey with a margin of error of plus or minus 1.5 percentage points and 1,000 physicians through a Web-based survey with a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points. Both surveys were conducted in summer 2009.

More information: The COPD Learn More Breathe Better Campaign:
www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/lung/copd/

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