

COPD Diagnosis & Management Algorithm

FOR PRIMARY CARE¹

If a patient presents with respiratory symptoms or you suspect respiratory disease

Ask patient about the following:

- Shortness of breath at rest or on exertion
- Activity limitation
- Cough
- Sputum production
- Frequent respiratory tract infections
- Smoker (current or past)

Screen smokers or ex-smokers over 40 years old who answer "YES" to any question below²

1. Do you cough regularly?
2. Do you cough up phlegm regularly?
3. Do even simple chores make you short of breath?
4. Do you wheeze when you exert yourself or at night?
5. Do you get frequent colds that persist longer than those of other people?

COPD SUSPECTED

CONFIRM DIAGNOSIS WITH SPIROMETRY*

Air flow limitation

- Post-bronchodilator $FEV_1 / FVC < LLN$ or < 0.70
- FEV_1 = forced expiratory volume in 1 second
- FVC = forced vital capacity
- LLN = Lower Limit of Normal

History/Risk Factors

- **History:** smoking, occupational, medical, family
- Second-hand smoke exposure
- Assess for orthopnea
- Allergies
- Indoor/outdoor air pollution
- **Symptoms:** shortness of breath at rest or on exertion, activity limitation, cough, sputum production (amount, colour, consistency), wheezing, chest tightness

Physical Examination

- Auscultation
- Signs of lung hyperinflation, accessory muscle use
- Signs of generalized muscle wasting
- Ankle swelling (heart failure)
- Cachexia, malnutrition: body mass index [underweight < 18.5 kg/m²; overweight ≥ 25 kg/m²; obese ≥ 30 kg/m²]

Testing should be done when patient is stable. Stable COPD refers to COPD in patients who are not currently experiencing an exacerbation of their disease.

COPD NOT CONFIRMED

DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSIS

- Asthma
- Cardiovascular or pulmonary vascular disease
- Obesity
- Severe deconditioning
- Anemia
- Interstitial lung disease
- Neuromuscular disease
- Bronchiectasis
- Tuberculosis

PATIENT ASSESSMENT & MONITORING

Assess Severity (Refer to Pharmacological Management figure below for definitions):

Modified Medical Research Council (mMRC) dyspnea scale:

- mMRC 0:** I only get breathless with strenuous exercise.
- mMRC 1:** I get short of breath when hurrying on level ground or walking up a slight hill.
- mMRC 2:** On level ground, I walk slower than other people of the same age because of breathlessness, or have to stop for breath when walking at my own pace.
- mMRC 3:** I stop for breath after walking 100 meters or after a few minutes.
- mMRC 4:** I am too short of breath to leave the house or breathless when dressing.

CTS severity score (symptom burden and the risk of future exacerbations):

- Mild:** CAT < 10 , mMRC 1, No AECOPD*, Low symptom burden
- Moderate:** CAT ≥ 10 , mMRC ≥ 2 , Low Risk of AECOPD*
- Severe:** CAT ≥ 10 , mMRC ≥ 2 , High Risk of AECOPD*

*Patients are considered at **Low Risk of AECOPD** with ≤ 1 moderate AECOPD in the last year (moderate AECOPD is an event with prescribed antibiotic and/or oral corticosteroids), and did not require hospital admission/ ED visit; or at **High Risk of AECOPD** with ≥ 2 moderate AECOPD or ≥ 1 severe exacerbation in the last year (severe AECOPD is an event requiring hospitalization or ED visit).

COPD Assessment Test (CAT) catestonline.org

Tests (do not test pulmonary function during acute exacerbation):

- Repeat spirometry as clinically indicated and additional PFTs as indicated
- CBC PRN to rule out polycythemia
- Consider blood gas if $FEV_1 < 40\%$ predicted (if resting $SpO_2 < 90\%$)
- Chest x-ray if clinically indicated
- Alpha 1-Antitrypsin (AAT):
 - If atypical features (early onset, family history of COPD, disabled in early 40s or 50s), send for AAT testing

Assess for and Manage Comorbidities:

- heart failure
- ischemic heart disease
- hypertension
- cancer
- diabetes
- sleep apnea
- glaucoma/cataracts
- anemia
- anxiety/depression
- metabolic syndrome
- osteopenia
- osteoporosis
- peripheral muscle dysfunction
- malnutrition

Acute Exacerbation of COPD (AECOPD):

- Frequency, severity, purulent/non-purulent
- Hospitalizations, emergency department visits, systemic corticosteroid use
- **Sputum gram stain & culture when purulent AECOPD if:** very poor lung function, AECOPD ≥ 2 /year, or has been on antibiotics in last 3 months

CONSIDER REFERRAL TO A SPECIALIST

- Not certain of the diagnosis
- Symptoms not proportional to level of airway obstruction
- Accelerated decline of lung function (FEV_1 declines 80ml or more per year over a two year period)
- Symptom onset at a young age (< 40 years)
- Suspect alpha-1-antitrypsin deficiency
- Not responding to therapy
- Severe or recurring acute exacerbations
- Moderate to severe disease

NON-PHARMACOLOGIC MANAGEMENT

COPD Education - provide or refer to program/Certified Respiratory Educator (CRE):

- Smoking cessation - [Journey to Quit](#)
- Pathophysiology and treatment rationale
- Inhaler technique - [How to use an inhaler](#)
- Self-management education with written [Action Plans](#)
- Identify and reduce/remove risk factors
- Acute exacerbation recognition and treatment
- Managing dyspnea, energy conservation
- Barriers to management or special considerations such as medication adherence, cultural barriers, financial issues, lack of support, language, nutritional assessment
- Lung Health Foundation's Certified respiratory educator (available nationally) and My Lung Health Coach (Ontario based) [Programs](#)

Exercise/ Pulmonary Rehabilitation:

- Refer patients for pulmonary rehabilitation within 1 month of hospital discharge for acute exacerbation of COPD
- Encourage all COPD patients to be active with approval/assistance/guidance from primary care provider
- Consider community-based or virtual at-home exercise programs
- COPD patient information - [About COPD](#)
- [Canadian Pulmonary Rehabilitation Portal](#)

Primary Care

- Follow-up post discharge from hospital
- Schedule regular follow-up care

Supportive Care

- Advanced Care Planning [Resources for Healthcare Providers](#)
- Lung Health Foundation's [Support and Education Group](#)

Resources: Primary Care Asthma & COPD Program: hcp.lunghealth.ca/clinical-programs

References:

1. O'Donnell, DE et al. Canadian thoracic society recommendations for management of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease - 2008 update - highlights for primary care. Can Respir J 2008 January/February; 15 (suppl A): p.2A.
2. Global Strategy for the Diagnosis, Management, and Prevention of Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (2018 Report)
3. Bourbeau, J., Bhutani, M., et al. "Canadian Thoracic Society Clinical Practice Guideline on pharmacotherapy in patients with COPD - 2019 update of evidence", Canadian Journal of Respiratory, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine, 3:4, 210-232, DOI: 10.1080/24745332.2019.1668652

The content of this care map is based on current available evidence and has been reviewed by medical experts.

It is provided for information purposes only. It is not intended to be a substitute for sound clinical judgement.

PHARMACOLOGIC MANAGEMENT

Mild (CAT < 10, mMRC 1, FEV ₁ ≥ 80%)	Moderate and Severe (CAT ≥ 10, mMRC ≥ 2, FEV ₁ < 80%)	
Low Symptom Burden ¹	Low AECOPD Risk ¹	High AECOPD Risk ¹ (increased risk of mortality)
LAMA or LABA	LAMA/LABA* LAMA/LABA/ICS	LAMA/LABA/ICS ⁺⁺ (reduces mortality) LAMA/LABA/ICS + Prophylactic macrolide/ PDE-4 inhibitor/ mucolytic agents ³
SABD pm		

SABD = short-acting bronchodilator
LAMA = long-acting muscarinic antagonist
LABA = long-acting beta agonist
ICS = inhaled corticosteroid

3. Bourbeau, J., Bhutani, M., et al, "Canadian Thoracic Society Clinical Practice Guideline on pharmacotherapy in patients with COPD - 2019 update of evidence", Canadian Journal of Respiratory, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine, 3:4, 210-232, DOI: 10.1080/24745332.2019.1668652
<https://doi.org/10.1080/24745332.2023.2231451>

Recommended vaccinations for people with COPD - [NACI Statements and Publications](#)

Long-Term Oxygen Therapy

- Can improve survival and function in appropriately chosen, stable COPD patients with chronic hypoxemia (PaO₂ of 55 mm Hg or lower), or when PaO₂ is less than 60 mm Hg in the presence of bilateral ankle edema, right heart failure or hematocrit $> 56\%$.

Acute Exacerbation of COPD Treatment:

- Oral/parenteral steroids (moderate - severe AECOPD)
- Antibiotics in patients with purulent exacerbations
- Increased short-acting bronchodilator (SABD)
- Oxygen therapy to maintain oxygen saturation at 88% - 92%

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Algorithm and references available at: hcp.lunghealth.ca/clinical-tools

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