



Live Well, Work Well

Health and wellness tips for your work, home and life—brought to you by the insurance professionals at USI Insurance Services

Emphysema is a form of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (or COPD), which is the fourth-leading cause of death in the United States, according to the CDC.

EMPHYSEMA

The lung disease emphysema affects over 4 million Americans per year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Because it develops gradually, severe symptoms such as shortness of breath may not even be noticed until the damage is irreversible.

Causes

Cigarette smoking is the most common cause of emphysema. Tobacco smoke and other pollutants are thought to cause the release of chemicals from within the lungs which damage the walls of the air sacs (alveoli); this damage becomes worse as time progresses. People with emphysema have alveoli that are unable to fill with fresh air, affecting the oxygen supply to the body.

Those who are deficient in alpha-1 antitrypsin (AAT), a naturally occurring substance in the lungs, may also develop emphysema. AAT is thought to protect the lungs from damage.

Risk Factors

You are most at risk for developing emphysema if you smoke; this includes cigar and pipe smokers. However, other factors include:

- Secondhand smoke exposure
- Exposure to pollutants such as chemical fumes
- Having a connective tissue disorder such as cutis laxa or Marfan syndrome
- Heredity – Although rare, some people inherit an AAT deficiency

Symptoms

The following may indicate emphysema:

- Shortness of breath
- Chronic cough (which may or may not produce mucus)
- Wheezing

- A decreased ability to exercise

Other problems that may accompany the onset of emphysema include anxiety, weight loss, ankle/foot/leg swelling and fatigue. Make an appointment with a physician immediately if you feel constantly short of breath (including during mild exercise) or if you often cough up colored mucus.

Treatment

Smoking cessation is the most effective treatment of emphysema, and can stop the progression of lung damage. Medications, such as antibiotics and others used to improve breathing, may be prescribed. It is highly recommended that people with emphysema get vaccinated against the flu and pneumonia.

Prevention

The single most important step you can take in preventing emphysema is to not smoke. Also, limit your exposure to secondhand smoke whenever possible. Other ways to avoid the disease:

- Wear a dust mask if exposed to chemical fumes on the job.
- Exercise regularly.
- Wash your hands often to fend off respiratory infections.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Change furnace and air conditioner filters regularly to avoid pollutants.

