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FREE PROFESSIONAL RESOURCE

COPD Awareness in Care Settings

A Practical Guide for Care Staff

Knowledge Hub Resource 062

Version 1.0 - **First Published**: August 2026

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Introduction

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (**COPD**) is the name for a group of long-term lung conditions that cause breathing difficulties because airflow through the lungs becomes restricted. The main conditions associated with COPD include **emphysema and chronic bronchitis**.

COPD usually develops gradually, and symptoms can vary considerably between individuals. Common symptoms include breathlessness, a persistent chesty cough, increased mucus or phlegm, wheezing and frequent chest infections. Some individuals may also experience fatigue, reduced mobility and difficulty completing everyday activities.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with COPD. Understanding the person's usual breathing pattern, following their individual care plan and recognising significant changes can help staff provide safe, reassuring and person-centred support.

Why This Resource Matters

Understanding COPD awareness helps care staff to:

- Recognise common symptoms associated with COPD.
- Understand how breathlessness can affect everyday activities and independence.
- Recognise changes from an individual's usual breathing pattern.
- Understand that COPD symptoms can sometimes worsen during a flare-up or **exacerbation**.
- Support individuals to complete activities at an appropriate pace.
- Provide reassurance when an individual is experiencing breathlessness or anxiety.
- Follow individual care plans and prescribed treatment arrangements.
- Recognise signs that may require prompt escalation or emergency assistance.
- Record and report significant changes accurately.
- Promote dignity, independence and person-centred care.

COPD and Breathlessness

Breathlessness can be frightening and may cause an individual to become anxious or distressed. Anxiety can sometimes make the sensation of breathlessness feel worse.

Care staff should remain calm, reassure the individual and follow their agreed care plan. Depending on the person's individual needs and guidance, this may include helping them adopt a comfortable position and allowing sufficient time to recover following activity.

Staff should **never assume that increased breathlessness is simply part of the person's COPD**. A noticeable or sudden change from their usual condition should be taken seriously and reported appropriately.

Key Message

Every person experiences COPD differently.

Knowing what is **normal for the individual** is particularly important. Changes in breathlessness, coughing, sputum, alertness or ability to carry out normal activities may indicate that the person's condition is worsening.

Care staff should observe carefully, follow the individual's care plan and **report significant changes promptly**.

Understanding COPD

COPD causes long-term changes to the lungs that make it more difficult for air to move in and out. The condition usually develops gradually and can affect people differently. Some individuals experience relatively mild symptoms, while others may have significant breathlessness that affects everyday activities.

COPD cannot currently be cured, but treatment and appropriate support can help manage symptoms, reduce the impact of the condition and improve quality of life.

Care staff do not need to diagnose or treat COPD. Their role is to understand how the condition affects the individual, follow the person's care plan and recognise changes that may require further attention.

Common Symptoms of COPD

Individuals living with COPD may experience:

- Shortness of breath, particularly during physical activity.
- A persistent chesty cough.
- Increased mucus or phlegm production.
- Wheezing.
- Frequent chest infections.
- Tiredness or reduced energy.
- Difficulty completing everyday activities because of breathlessness.
- Reduced appetite or difficulty eating larger meals in some cases.
- Anxiety associated with breathing difficulties.

The individual's usual symptoms should be documented within their care arrangements where appropriate.

Supporting Someone Who Is Breathless

If an individual becomes breathless:

- Remain calm and provide reassurance.
- Encourage the person to stop the activity and allow time to recover.
- Help them adopt a comfortable position according to their individual care plan and preferences.
- Avoid rushing or placing unnecessary demands on the individual.
- Encourage any breathing techniques they have been taught by an appropriate healthcare professional.
- Follow their prescribed treatment arrangements and care plan.
- Observe whether their breathing returns to its usual pattern.
- Report significant or persistent changes promptly.

Care staff should only assist with prescribed inhalers, oxygen or other medication **when trained, competent and authorised to do so and in accordance with the individual's care plan and organisational procedures**.

COPD Flare-Ups

A COPD **flare-up or exacerbation** occurs when symptoms become noticeably worse than usual.

Possible signs can include:

- Increased breathlessness.
- Increased coughing.
- A change in the amount, thickness or colour of sputum/phlegm.
- Increased wheezing or chest tightness.
- Reduced ability to complete usual activities.
- Increased tiredness or weakness.
- Reduced appetite.
- Changes in alertness or behaviour.
- Symptoms of a possible chest infection.

Early recognition is important because an exacerbation may require additional medical assessment or treatment.

Remember

Do not dismiss worsening breathlessness simply because an individual already has COPD.

Care staff should know the person's usual condition, observe for significant changes and follow agreed escalation procedures when symptoms worsen.

A sudden or severe breathing problem may be a **medical emergency** and should be treated accordingly.

Professional Responsibilities

Care staff have an important role in supporting individuals living with COPD and recognising when their condition may be changing. Because breathing ability can vary between individuals, staff should understand the person's usual symptoms, individual care plan and agreed escalation procedures.

As a care professional, you should always:

- Treat the individual with dignity, patience and respect.
- Know the person's usual breathing pattern and level of activity.
- Follow the individual's care plan and prescribed treatment arrangements.
- Allow sufficient time for activities and avoid unnecessarily rushing the person.
- Encourage appropriate rest periods when needed.
- Support safe independence according to the individual's abilities.
- Observe for changes in breathlessness, coughing, sputum or general wellbeing.
- Take increased or unusual breathlessness seriously.
- Assist with prescribed inhalers, oxygen or other treatments only when trained, competent and authorised.
- Never change oxygen flow rates or prescribed medication independently.
- Record relevant observations accurately.
- Report significant changes promptly and follow organisational escalation procedures.

When to Raise Concerns

Report concerns promptly if the individual:

- Becomes more breathless than usual.
- Develops increased coughing or wheezing.
- Has a noticeable change in the amount, colour or thickness of sputum/phlegm.
- Shows signs of a possible chest infection.
- Is struggling more than usual with everyday activities.
- Has significantly reduced food or fluid intake.
- Appears unusually tired, weak, confused or drowsy.
- Is not responding as expected to their usual prescribed treatment.
- Experiences repeated or worsening COPD symptoms.

Always follow the individual's care plan and your organisation's procedures for seeking clinical advice.

When to Call 999

Severe breathing difficulties can be a medical emergency.

Call 999 for emergency assistance if the individual:

- Is severely struggling to breathe or suddenly becomes extremely breathless.
- Cannot speak normally because of severe breathlessness.
- Develops blue, grey or unusually pale lips or skin.
- Becomes suddenly confused, very drowsy, difficult to wake or loses consciousness.
- Develops severe chest pain, particularly with breathing difficulty.
- Has symptoms that are rapidly worsening and you believe their life may be at risk.

If you are seriously concerned that the individual is experiencing a **life-threatening emergency**, call 999 and follow emergency procedures.

Supporting Everyday Wellbeing

COPD can affect much more than breathing. Persistent breathlessness and fatigue may affect confidence, mobility, appetite, sleep and emotional wellbeing.

Care staff can help by:

- Encouraging individuals to work at a comfortable pace.
- Planning activities to allow appropriate rest periods.
- Supporting good nutrition and hydration according to the person's care plan.
- Encouraging appropriate activity and mobility where advised.
- Listening to concerns about breathlessness and anxiety.
- Supporting prescribed smoking cessation measures where applicable and appropriate.
- Promoting independence without placing unnecessary pressure on the individual.

Good Practice Reminder

Never assume that worsening breathlessness is simply “normal COPD.”

Recognising changes from an individual's usual condition, remaining calm, following their care plan and escalating concerns promptly can help ensure they receive appropriate support when their condition worsens.

Summary

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (**COPD**) is a long-term lung condition that can cause breathlessness, persistent coughing, increased sputum production, wheezing and fatigue. Symptoms vary between individuals and can significantly affect mobility, independence and everyday activities.

Care staff play an important role in supporting individuals living with COPD by understanding their usual condition, allowing activities to be completed at an appropriate pace, following individual care plans and recognising signs that symptoms may be worsening.

Increased or severe breathlessness should never automatically be assumed to be part of the person's normal COPD. Significant changes should be reported promptly, and emergency assistance should be sought when required.

COPD Awareness Checklist

✓ Know the individual's usual breathing pattern and COPD symptoms.

✓ Follow the person's individual care plan and prescribed treatment arrangements.

✓ Allow sufficient time for activities and appropriate rest periods.

✓ Remain calm and provide reassurance if the individual becomes breathless.

✓ Observe for increased coughing, wheezing or breathlessness.

✓ Be aware of changes in the amount, colour or thickness of sputum/phlegm.

✓ Recognise possible signs of a COPD flare-up or chest infection.

✓ Assist with prescribed inhalers, oxygen or medication only when trained, competent and authorised.

✓ **Never independently alter prescribed medication or oxygen flow rates.**

✓ Record relevant observations accurately and report significant changes promptly.

✓ Recognise severe breathing difficulties as a potential medical emergency and **call 999 when required**.

Further Information

For further guidance on COPD, visit:

NHS – Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chronic-obstructive-pulmonary-disease-copd/

Asthma + Lung UK – COPD
https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/conditions/copd

NICE – Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease
https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng115

Care Quality Commission (CQC)
https://www.cqc.org.uk/

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- Resource 030 – Sepsis Awareness in Care Settings
- Resource 034 – Recognising Deterioration in Care Settings
- Resource 049 – Frailty Awareness
- Resource 056 – Diabetes Awareness in Care Settings
- Resource 058 – Stroke Awareness in Care Settings

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