Having COPD means that your lungs do not work as well as a person with normal lungs. Because of this, infections such as a simple cold, allergies, or changes in air quality may make it harder for you to breathe and cause an exacerbation. An exacerbation of COPD is when your symptoms of COPD suddenly get worse. When this happens, the medicines you take may need to be changed or new medicines may need to be added.

COPD exacerbations can make a person very sick and may lead to complications with a long recovery time. Some people may even need to stay in the hospital or intensive care unit for an exacerbation.

**What causes an exacerbation of COPD?**

An exacerbation can be caused by poor air quality or changes in environment but exacerbations are most often caused by viral or bacterial infections in your lungs. Because you have COPD, your lungs are already at greater risk than others, so even a minor infection might make it harder to breathe. Symptoms can include cough and shortness of breath. Sometimes you may find yourself coughing up more spit or phlegm. It is not always known what the cause of a COPD exacerbation is.

**When should you tell someone about your symptoms?**

An untreated COPD exacerbation can lead to a hospital admission and possibly even need for a ventilator machine to help you breathe. Anytime you feel like you are struggling to breathe, or daily tasks become difficult due to shortness of breath, you should tell the nursing staff, your physician, or other medical staff. Even if you think you just have a cold, it is important to take it seriously. Notifying staff of your symptoms early will help your care team keep you healthy and out of the hospital.

**What new medicines will be prescribed?**

It is likely that more breathing treatments or inhalers will be used for a few days to a few weeks. These treatments will open your airways and reduce inflammation. Additionally, you may receive a steroid pill. The steroid pill will help reduce inflammation as your lungs recover. Steroids are usually only used for a short period of time due to side effects such as high blood sugar and insomnia. You may also need additional oxygen.
How can COPD exacerbations be prevented?

- A large part of preventing exacerbations is preventing infection, and a great way to do that is to receive your yearly flu vaccine and to be vaccinated for pneumonia as well.
- If you are still smoking, form a plan to quit. Your healthcare team can help with this.
- Finally, for people with COPD, it is very important to use all medications, breathing treatments, and oxygen as they are prescribed. Following the plan of care for your COPD will help you maintain your health.