PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF COPD

From airway inflammation to air trapping, hyperinflation, and respiratory failure

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1

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, you should be able to:

1. Define COPD using contemporary terminology.
2. Explain the pathophysiology of chronic bronchitis and emphysema.
3. Identify major COPD risk factors, etiotypes, and diagnostic criteria.
4. Relate airflow obstruction, air trapping, and hyperinflation to clinical findings.
5. Describe current prevention, treatment, and exacerbation-management strategies.

2

What Is COPD?

A heterogeneous lung condition with persistent airflow obstruction

COPD is characterized by:

- Chronic respiratory symptoms
- Airway and/or alveolar abnormalities
- Persistent, often progressive airflow obstruction
- Substantial variation from one patient to another

COPD is not simply

"irreversible asthma"

or

"a smoker's disease"

The diagnosis requires the right clinical context plus persistent airflow obstruction on post-bronchodilator spirometry.

3

COPD Has More Than One Starting Point

Different exposures and life-course events can lead to a similar physiologic endpoint

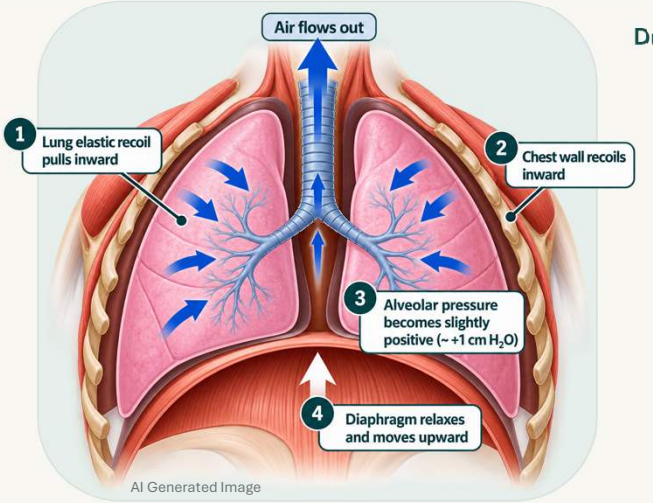
- **C** — **Cigarette smoke**: including passive exposure
- **I** — **Infections**: including prior tuberculosis and HIV-associated disease
- **P** — **Pollution**: air pollution, biomass, occupational exposure
- **A** — **Asthma**: abnormal lung-function trajectory
- **G** — **Genetics**: including alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency
- **U** — **Unknown**: cause not yet identified
- **D** — **Development**: prematurity and impaired lung growth

Different beginnings → shared endpoint: persistent airflow obstruction

4

Normal Expiration: Elastic Recoil Does the Work

Quiet expiration is normally passive



During quiet expiration:

- Inspiratory muscles relax
- Lung elastic recoil decreases thoracic volume
- Alveolar pressure becomes slightly positive
- Air flows outward down the pressure gradient
- Small airways remain supported by surrounding lung tissue

5

Why Airways Collapse in Emphysema

Loss of recoil + loss of radial traction + expiratory pressure

NORMAL

- Elastic recoil drives flow outward
- Alveolar attachments help splint small airways open
- Airway closure occurs late at low lung volumes

EMPHYSEMA

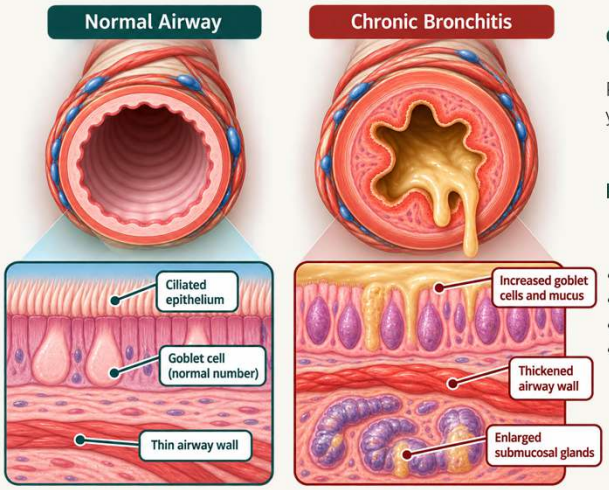
- Alveolar walls and attachments are destroyed
- Elastic recoil decreases
- Small airways narrow or collapse earlier during expiration

Result: expiratory flow limitation → air trapping → hyperinflation

6

Chronic Bronchitis: The Airway Side of COPD

Mucus hypersecretion and airway inflammation increase resistance



AI Generated Image

Classic clinical definition

Productive cough for ≥3 months in each of 2 consecutive years, after excluding other causes.

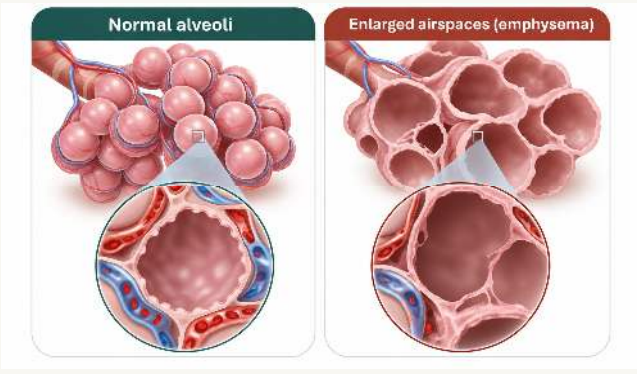
Pathologic changes

- Goblet-cell hyperplasia and mucus hypersecretion
- Submucosal gland enlargement
- Chronic airway inflammation
- Small-airway narrowing and mucus plugging

7

Emphysema: The Alveolar Side of COPD

Permanent enlargement of distal airspaces with destruction of alveolar walls



AI Generated Image

What is lost?

- Alveolar walls
- Gas-exchanging surface area
- Pulmonary capillary bed
- Elastic recoil
- Radial traction supporting small airways

Airspaces get larger — but usable surface area gets smaller.

8

Protease–Antiprotease Balance

Why alpha-1 antitrypsin matters

PROTEASE ACTIVITY

Neutrophil elastase

Helps destroy pathogens — but can also damage elastin and lung tissue when inadequately controlled.

Smoking → inflammation → greater protease burden

BALANCE

ANTIPROTEASE PROTECTION

Alpha-1 antitrypsin

A circulating protease-inhibitor protein that protects lung tissue from neutrophil elastase.

AAT deficiency → less protection → accelerated emphysema risk

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9

CASE STUDY

Why can’t he get the air out?

A 67-year-old man with a 45-pack-year smoking history presents with progressive exertional dyspnea. CT shows emphysematous change and hyperinflation. Breath sounds are diminished, expiration is prolonged, and he uses pursed-lip breathing.

Which mechanism best explains his expiratory flow limitation?

Loss of elastic recoil and alveolar attachments allows small airways to narrow or collapse earlier during expiration.

Clinical clue: pursed-lip breathing can create a small amount of expiratory back-pressure that helps splint airways open longer.

10

Inflammation in COPD Is Heterogeneous

The traditional pattern is useful — but it is not the whole story

COMMON COPD PATTERN

- Macrophages
- Neutrophils
- CD8+ T cells
- IL-8 and other inflammatory mediators

TYPE 2 / EOSINOPHILIC PATTERN

- Present in a clinically important subset
- Blood eosinophils can help guide ICS use
- Now relevant to selected biologic therapy

COPD is not one inflammatory disease — phenotype and exacerbation history matter.

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11

11

Risk Factors: Think Beyond Cigarettes

Smoking remains important, but COPD can develop through multiple exposures and life-course pathways

TOBACCO / INHALED	Cigarettes • secondhand smoke • other inhaled exposures
ENVIRONMENT / WORK	Air pollution • biomass smoke • dusts • fumes • occupational exposure
HOST FACTORS	Genetics • alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency • abnormal lung development
EARLY-LIFE / DISEASE	Prematurity • childhood infection • asthma • prior tuberculosis

A smoking history strengthens the case for COPD — its absence does not rule COPD out.

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12

When Should You Suspect COPD?

Symptoms + exposure history should trigger spirometry

SYMPTOMS

- Progressive dyspnea
- Chronic cough
- Sputum production
- Recurrent lower respiratory infections
- Wheeze or activity limitation

HISTORY

- Tobacco exposure
- Occupational exposure
- Air pollution / biomass
- Asthma or childhood disease
- Family/genetic risk

CONFIRM

Post-bronchodilator spirometry

$FEV_1/FVC < 0.70$

Symptoms suggest COPD. Spirometry confirms persistent airflow obstruction.

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13

Spirometry Confirms Persistent Airflow Obstruction

Look at the ratio — not the FEV_1 alone

Example

FEV_1	**1.8 L**
FVC	**3.2 L**
FEV_1/FVC	**0.56**

COPD DIAGNOSTIC REQUIREMENT

Post-bronchodilator $FEV_1/FVC < 0.70$

in the appropriate clinical context

Bronchodilator responsiveness can occur in COPD. The magnitude of reversibility should not be used to distinguish COPD from asthma.

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14

GOLD Grades: How Severe Is the Airflow Obstruction?

Use post-bronchodilator FEV_1 % predicted after COPD has been confirmed

GOLD 1	GOLD 2	GOLD 3	GOLD 4
Mild	Moderate	Severe	Very severe
≥ 80%	50–79%	30–49%	< 30%
FEV_1 predicted	FEV_1 predicted	FEV_1 predicted	FEV_1 predicted

Airflow grade is only one dimension of COPD severity — symptoms and exacerbations drive treatment decisions too.

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15

15

Symptoms Matter: mMRC and CAT

FEV_1 does not tell you how the patient experiences the disease

mMRC DYSPNEA SCALE

Focuses primarily on how breathlessness limits activity.

mMRC ≥ 2

indicates greater symptom burden

CAT — COPD ASSESSMENT TEST

Assesses cough, sputum, chest tightness, activity, confidence, sleep and energy.

CAT ≥ 10

indicates greater symptom burden

Ask what COPD prevents the patient from doing — not just what the spirometry says.

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16

GOLD A, B, E: Symptoms + Exacerbation History

GOLD 2026: even one moderate or severe exacerbation now places the patient in Group E

GROUP E — EXACERBATION-PRONE

≥ 1 moderate OR severe exacerbation in the previous year

ZERO moderate or severe exacerbations in the previous year

GROUP A

Lower symptom burden
mMRC 0–1 • CAAT < 10

GROUP B

Greater symptom burden
mMRC ≥ 2 • CAAT ≥ 10

2026 change: the previous threshold of ≥2 moderate exacerbations or ≥1 hospitalization is no longer used for Group E.

Ref. 1, 2

17

17

Pre-COPD and PRISm Are Not the Same Thing

Both can occur before classic spirometric COPD is present

PRE-COPD

- Respiratory symptoms and/or structural or physiologic abnormalities
- Post-bronchodilator FEV_1/FVC remains ≥ 0.70
- May include emphysema, gas trapping, hyperinflation or reduced DLCO

PRISm

- Preserved Ratio Impaired Spirometry
- $FEV_1/FVC \geq 0.70$
- $FEV_1 < 80\%$ predicted
- Not synonymous with COPD

Some patients progress to COPD. Others remain stable or move between spirometric categories.

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18

18

Obstruction Does Not Automatically Mean COPD

Consider alternative and coexisting diagnoses

Asthma	Variable airflow limitation; may coexist with COPD
Bronchiolitis	Small-airway disease from multiple causes
Bronchiectasis	Chronic sputum, recurrent infection, CT airway dilation
Central airway lesion	Tumor or structural obstruction can mimic airflow limitation
Post-TB disease	Airflow obstruction after prior pulmonary tuberculosis
Heart failure / other causes	May explain dyspnea even when COPD is also present

Clubbing is not a typical COPD finding — look for another or additional diagnosis.

Ref. 1

19

19

CASE STUDY

Does she actually have COPD?

A 59-year-old woman reports progressive exertional dyspnea and chronic cough. She smoked for 20 years but quit 12 years ago. Post-bronchodilator spirometry shows:

FEV_1 = 68% predicted FVC = 82% predicted FEV_1/FVC = 0.74

Can COPD be confirmed from these results?

No. The post-bronchodilator FEV_1/FVC is preserved at 0.74.

Next step: reassess the differential and look for pre-COPD/PRISm, asthma, cardiac disease, deconditioning, or another explanation for her symptoms.

20

Imaging: Helpful, but Not Required to Diagnose COPD

Chest imaging identifies structural disease, complications and alternative diagnoses

CHEST X-RAY

- May show hyperinflation
- Flattened diaphragms
- Increased retrosternal airspace
- Useful for alternative diagnoses
- Can be normal despite COPD

CHEST CT

- Defines emphysema distribution
- Detects bronchiectasis or lung cancer
- Assesses bullae and airway disease
- Important for lung-volume-reduction planning

Spirometry confirms airflow obstruction. Imaging tells us what the lungs look like and what else may be present.

Ref. 1

21

21

Hyperinflation Changes the Mechanics of Breathing

The diaphragm becomes shorter and flatter — and less mechanically efficient

NORMAL

Domed diaphragm

Better length–tension relationship

→

AIR TRAPPING

Higher end-expiratory lung volume

Inspiratory capacity falls

→

RESULT

More work for each breath

Hyperinflation does not paralyze the diaphragm — it places the diaphragm at a mechanical disadvantage.

Ref. 1

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22

Dynamic Hyperinflation: When the Next Breath Comes Too Soon

Incomplete exhalation progressively raises end-expiratory lung volume

1. **Expiratory flow limitation** →
2. **Exhalation is incomplete** →
3. **Next breath begins** →
4. **Air trapping increases** →
5. **Intrinsic PEEP & dyspnea rise**

Tachypnea can worsen the problem by shortening expiratory time.

This concept becomes critical when we discuss NIV and invasive ventilation later in the course.

Ref. 1

23

23

COPD Complications Reflect More Than Airflow Obstruction

Chronic hypoxemia, hyperinflation and exacerbations affect multiple systems

RESPIRATORY

Acute/chronic respiratory failure
Pneumonia
Pneumothorax

CARDIOVASCULAR

Pulmonary hypertension
Cor pulmonale
Cardiovascular comorbidity

SYSTEMIC

Weight loss / muscle dysfunction
Osteoporosis
Anxiety & depression

HEMATOLOGIC

Secondary erythrocytosis can occur with chronic hypoxemia

Clubbing is not on this list because it is not a typical COPD finding.

Ref. 1

24

24

Preventing Exacerbations Is a Major Treatment Goal

Every exacerbation can accelerate decline and increase future risk

STOP EXPOSURE	Smoking cessation • avoid occupational and environmental triggers
VACCINATE	Influenza • pneumococcal • COVID-19 • RSV and other age/risk-appropriate vaccines
OPTIMIZE THERAPY	Correct inhaler/device • adherence • technique • appropriate maintenance treatment
STAY ACTIVE	Pulmonary rehabilitation • physical activity • nutrition
ACTION PLAN	Recognize worsening symptoms early and know when to seek help

Exacerbation means an acute worsening of symptoms — not necessarily hospitalization.

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25

25

COPD Treatment Has Two Broad Goals

Reduce today's burden while lowering tomorrow's risk

REDUCE SYMPTOMS

- Relieve dyspnea
- Improve exercise tolerance
- Improve health status
- Support activity and independence

REDUCE FUTURE RISK

- Prevent exacerbations
- Reduce hospitalizations
- Slow avoidable decline
- Reduce treatment complications and mortality risk

Treatment should be individualized to symptoms, exacerbation history, eosinophils, comorbidities and the patient's ability to use the device.

Ref. 1

26

26

Initial Pharmacologic Treatment: GOLD A, B and E

Bronchodilation remains the foundation

A — **A bronchodilator**

Choice depends on symptom relief and patient/device factors

B — **LABA + LAMA**

Dual long-acting bronchodilation is preferred initial therapy

E — **LABA + LAMA**

Consider LABA + LAMA + ICS when eosinophils are high and ICS is indicated

LABA + ICS alone is generally not the preferred COPD combination when an ICS is indicated.

Ref. 1, 2

27

27

Blood Eosinophils Help Predict ICS Benefit

Think of eosinophils as a treatment biomarker — not a COPD diagnostic test

< 100 cells/µL

Less likelihood of ICS benefit for exacerbation prevention

100–299

Potential benefit increases as the count rises

≥ 300 cells/µL

Greatest likelihood of benefit in patients with exacerbations

The decision still depends on exacerbation history, pneumonia risk, asthma features and the overall clinical picture.

Ref. 1, 2

28

28

The Best Medication Fails if the Patient Cannot Use the Device

Match the inhaler or nebulizer to the patient

INSPIRATORY FLOW	Can the patient generate adequate flow for a DPI?
DEXTERITY	Can they load, actuate and hold the device correctly?
COORDINATION	Would a spacer, breath-actuated device or nebulizer help?
COGNITION	Can the patient remember and reproduce the technique?
ACCESS	Is the medication affordable and consistently available?

Watch the patient use the device. Technique should be reassessed repeatedly.

Ref. 1, 2

29

29

CASE STUDY

Which treatment direction makes sense?

A 67-year-old man has confirmed COPD. CAT = 18. During the past year he had three exacerbations treated with steroids/antibiotics, including one hospitalization. Blood eosinophils = 340 cells/µL. He is currently using a LAMA alone.

He is GOLD Group E and has a strong signal that ICS-containing therapy may reduce exacerbations.

Before changing therapy: confirm adherence and technique, review pneumonia risk and comorbidities, then consider escalation to LABA + LAMA + ICS.

30

30

Follow-Up Treatment: Identify the Problem First

Persistent dyspnea and recurrent exacerbations follow different treatment pathways

PERSISTENT DYSPNEA

- LABA or LAMA → LABA + LAMA
- Check device, technique and adherence
- Escalate non-pharmacologic treatment
- Consider ensifentrine
- Look for other causes of dyspnea

RECURRENT EXACERBATIONS

- Use eosinophils to guide ICS decisions
- Escalate to triple therapy when indicated
- Consider roflumilast or azithromycin in selected patients
- Biologic therapy for selected eosinophilic COPD

Do not automatically add another medication until you know what you are trying to fix.

Ref. 1, 2

31

31

Ensifentrine: A Newer Option for Persistent Dyspnea

An inhaled dual PDE3/PDE4 inhibitor for maintenance treatment of COPD

WHAT IT IS

Dual PDE3 + PDE4 inhibitor

HOW GIVEN

Nebulized maintenance therapy

GOLD 2026

Consider for persistent dyspnea despite LABA + LAMA

Ensifentrine is not roflumilast: roflumilast is an oral selective PDE4 inhibitor used primarily to reduce exacerbation risk in selected patients.

Ref. 1, 2

32

32

Roflumilast and Azithromycin: Selected Patients, Not Everyone

These therapies target exacerbation risk rather than routine daily dyspnea

ROFLUMILAST

- Oral selective PDE4 inhibitor
- Consider when FEV_1 < 50% predicted
- Chronic bronchitis phenotype
- History of exacerbations
- Watch weight loss and adverse effects

AZITHROMYCIN

- May reduce exacerbations in selected patients
- Benefit favored in former smokers
- Consider QT, hearing and antimicrobial resistance
- Not routine therapy for every COPD patient

These are add-on strategies after inhaled therapy, adherence and modifiable risks have been addressed.

Ref. 1, 2

33

33

Biologics Have Entered COPD Treatment

GOLD 2026 includes biologic therapy for a highly selected eosinophilic COPD population

DUPILUMAB

- Targets IL-4 / IL-13 signaling
- For selected patients with chronic bronchitis
- Recurrent exacerbations despite triple therapy
- Blood eosinophils ≥ 300 cells/μL

MEPOLIZUMAB

- Targets IL-5
- Included in GOLD 2026 biologic pathway
- Selected eosinophilic COPD with recurrent exacerbations
- May be considered with or without chronic bronchitis

Biologics are add-on therapy — not replacements for optimized inhaled maintenance treatment.

Ref. 1, 2

34

34

Pulmonary Rehabilitation Is Core COPD Therapy

Exercise training + education + behavior change

EXERCISE

Endurance
Strength
Breathing strategies

EDUCATION

Devices
Action plans
Energy conservation

OUTCOMES

Less dyspnea
Better exercise capacity
Better quality of life

Pulmonary rehabilitation is especially important after hospitalization for an exacerbation and in symptomatic patients.

Ref. 1, 2

35

35

Long-Term Oxygen Therapy: Survival Benefit Is Specific

Oxygen improves survival in severe chronic resting hypoxemia — not simply because a patient has COPD

WHEN LTOT MATTERS MOST

- Severe chronic resting hypoxemia
- Confirm the patient is clinically stable
- Use enough oxygen to correct significant hypoxemia
- Reassess need after acute illness when appropriate

WHAT OXYGEN DOES NOT DO

- It does not treat airflow obstruction
- It does not automatically benefit moderate resting desaturation
- It should not replace bronchodilation, rehabilitation or smoking cessation

Prescribe oxygen for documented hypoxemia — not for the sensation of dyspnea alone.

Ref. 1

36

36

Bronchoscopic Lung Volume Reduction

One-way endobronchial valves can reduce hyperinflation in carefully selected emphysema

TARGET

Severe emphysema with hyperinflation

→

SELECT

Identify a target lobe and assess collateral ventilation

→

VALVE

One-way valves allow air to exit the target lobe

→

RESULT

Target-lobe volume falls; mechanics may improve

Major early complication: pneumothorax

Patient selection is critical; not every patient with severe COPD is a candidate.

Ref. 1

37

37

Surgical Options for Advanced COPD

Selected patients may benefit from bullectomy, LVRS or transplantation

BULLECTOMY

Remove a large bulla compressing more functional lung

LVRS

Resect selected severely emphysematous tissue to reduce hyperinflation

TRANSPLANT

Consider in carefully selected patients with advanced disease despite maximal therapy

LVRS is not simply a lobectomy — it is targeted resection intended to improve respiratory mechanics.

Ref. 1

38

38

Smoking Cessation Is Disease-Modifying Treatment

Stopping tobacco exposure slows the accelerated loss of lung function

ASK

Identify current tobacco and nicotine use

TREAT

Counseling + FDA-approved cessation medication

FOLLOW UP

Relapse is common; keep offering support without judgment

Vaping should not replace evidence-based cessation counseling and approved pharmacotherapy.

Ref. 1

39

39

CASE STUDY

More medication — or a different strategy?

A 70-year-old former smoker has severe emphysema and persistent dyspnea despite LABA + LAMA. He reports good adherence and demonstrates correct inhaler technique. He has had no exacerbations during the past year. CT shows marked hyperinflation and heterogeneous upper-lobe emphysema.

Do not assume the answer is ICS. His main problem is dyspnea — not exacerbations.

Consider pulmonary rehabilitation, ensifentrine and evaluation for lung-volume-reduction options while also reassessing other causes of dyspnea.

40

40

COPD Exacerbation: An Acute Change From Baseline

Think symptoms first — then consider the trigger and important mimics

TYPICAL WORSENING

- Dyspnea
- Cough and/or sputum
- Sputum volume or purulence
- Tachypnea or tachycardia may accompany the event
- Usually evolves over < 14 days

DO NOT MISS

- Pneumonia
- Pulmonary embolism
- Acute heart failure
- Pneumothorax
- Arrhythmia or other acute illness

An exacerbation may be triggered by infection, pollution or another insult — but not every deterioration is COPD.

Ref. 1

41

41

Initial Treatment of a COPD Exacerbation

Relieve obstruction, control oxygen and treat the cause when indicated

BRONCHODILATORS	Short-acting beta agonist ± short-acting anticholinergic
SYSTEMIC STEROIDS	Short course can improve lung function and shorten recovery
ANTIBIOTICS	Use when bacterial infection is likely or ventilatory support is required
CONTROLLED OXYGEN	Target SpO_2 about 88–92% in patients at risk for hypercapnic respiratory failure
VENTILATORY SUPPORT	NIV is first-line support for acute hypercapnic respiratory acidosis when appropriate

Treat the patient, not just the $PaCO_2$.

Ref. 1

42

42

CASE STUDY

Acute-on-chronic hypercapnic respiratory failure

A 72-year-old with severe COPD arrives using accessory muscles, RR 32/min and increasing somnolence.

pH 7.19 $PaCO_2$ 75 mmHg PaO_2 52 mmHg HCO_3^- 30 mEq/L

Interpretation: acute respiratory acidosis superimposed on chronic CO_2 retention.

If no immediate contraindication exists: controlled oxygen + bronchodilators/steroids + prompt NIV, with close reassessment.

43

43

NIV Is First-Line Ventilatory Support for Acidotic AECOPD

Bilevel pressure support reduces work of breathing and can prevent intubation

WHEN TO CONSIDER NIV

- Acute or acute-on-chronic respiratory acidosis
- Increased work of breathing / respiratory distress
- Persistent hypercapnia despite initial therapy
- Patient can protect airway and cooperate

WHAT TO WATCH

- Mask/interface tolerance
- Respiratory rate and accessory muscle use
- Tidal volume / synchrony / leaks
- pH and $PaCO_2$ trend
- Mental status and hemodynamics

Standard bilevel NIV is evidence-based; volume-assured modes may be useful in selected patients but are not proven universally superior.

Ref. 1, 3

44

44

Reassess Early: Is NIV Working?

Improvement should be apparent clinically and in gas exchange

SIGNS OF RESPONSE

- Lower respiratory rate
- Less accessory muscle use
- Improving pH
- Falling $PaCO_2$ when appropriate
- Improved alertness and comfort

SIGNS OF FAILURE

- Worsening acidosis
- Declining mental status / inability to protect airway
- Severe agitation or intolerance
- Hemodynamic instability
- Refractory hypoxemia or worsening distress

Do not let NIV delay intubation when the patient is clearly deteriorating.

Ref. 1, 3

45

45

HFNC in Acute COPD: Where Does It Fit?

Key point: helpful in selected patients, but it does not replace NIV for acidotic hypercapnia.

AECOPD + respiratory failure
Assess ABG, WOB, mental status

↓

pH ≤ 7.35 + $PaCO_2$ ↑
Start NIV first when appropriate

↓

HFNC is a bridge / alternative when NIV is not tolerated or during breaks

What HFNC may do in COPD

- Delivers heated, humidified high-flow gas
- Washes out upper-airway dead space
- May reduce respiratory rate and inspiratory effort
- Provides small flow-dependent positive airway pressure
- Often better tolerated than a tight mask

Use caution

- Do not delay NIV in acidotic hypercapnic failure
- Recheck ABG and clinical status early
- Escalate if pH, $PaCO_2$, WOB, or mental status worsens
- Avoid oxygen-induced hypercapnia; target ordered SpO_2 range

Teaching takeaway: NIV remains the better-established first-line support for acute hypercapnic COPD exacerbation with acidosis. HFNC belongs in the discussion as a selected-use option—not as an NIV replacement.

Guidance summary: ERS HFNC guideline recommends NIV before HFNC for COPD with acute hypercapnic respiratory failure; 2024 RCT found HFNC was not non-inferior to NIV in acute-moderate hypercapnic AECOPD.

Ref. 1, 3, 4

46

When Intubation Is Necessary

The decision is clinical — not based on a single $PaCO_2$ threshold

AIRWAY

Cannot protect airway
Copious secretions / aspiration risk

VENTILATION

Progressive acidosis
NIV failure despite optimization

OXYGENATION

Severe refractory hypoxemia
or rapidly worsening gas exchange

INSTABILITY

Shock, arrest, severe arrhythmia
or worsening mental status

A $PaCO_2$ of 100, 120 or 140 mmHg is not by itself an indication to intubate — context and pH matter.

Ref. 1, 3

46

47

Ventilating Severe COPD: Give the Patient Time to Exhale

Avoid chasing a normal $PaCO_2$ at the expense of dynamic hyperinflation

VENTILATOR STRATEGY

- Lower respiratory rate
- High inspiratory flow / shorter inspiratory time
- Long expiratory time
- Appropriate tidal volume
- Monitor plateau pressure and auto-PEEP

ACCEPT

Permissive hypercapnia when necessary

AVOID

- Excessive respiratory rate
- Breath stacking
- Progressive auto-PEEP
- Hypotension from hyperinflation
- Trying to normalize $PaCO_2$ too quickly

Target adequate ventilation and a tolerable pH — not a 'normal' $PaCO_2$.

Ref. 1, 3

47

48

Extubation: Plan the Landing Before Removing the Tube

High-risk COPD patients may benefit from planned NIV after extubation

READINESS

Improving cause
Manageable secretions
Successful SBT

HIGH RISK

COPD
Hypercapnia
Prior difficult weaning

POST-EXTUBATION

Planned NIV
in appropriate
high-risk patients

NIV is most effective when planned for the right patient — not used to postpone reintubation in obvious post-extubation failure.

Ref. 1, 3

48

49

Chronic Home NIV: U.S. Medicare Criteria Changed

CMS now has national coverage criteria for chronic respiratory failure due to COPD

CORE INITIAL CRITERIA — RAD WITH BACKUP RATE

- Persistent awake $PaCO_2$ ≥ 52 mmHg on prescribed FiO_2
- Sleep apnea is not the predominant cause of hypercapnia
- Stable COPD OR persistent hypercapnia ≥ 2 weeks after hospitalization once the exacerbation has resolved
- High-intensity NIV is the intended treatment strategy

IMPORTANT 2025–2026 CHANGE

The old requirement for nocturnal SpO_2 ≤ 88% is no longer part of the national COPD NIV criteria.

Formal sleep testing is not required when the clinician determines sleep apnea is not the predominant cause.

Coverage details vary by device and situation; use current CMS NCD 240.9 when documenting qualification.

Ref. 1, 5

49

50

Home Oxygen: Separate Clinical Benefit From Coverage Rules

Medicare qualification is based on documented hypoxemia

GROUP I — COMMON THRESHOLDS

$PaO_2 \leq 55$ mmHg

or

$SaO_2 \leq 88\%$

at rest, during sleep, or during exercise under qualifying conditions

GROUP II

PaO_2 56–59 mmHg

or $SaO_2 = 89\%$

plus qualifying evidence such as dependent edema from CHF, pulmonary hypertension/cor pulmonale, or erythrocytosis.

Clinical indication and payer qualification overlap — but they are not exactly the same question.

Ref. 1, 5

50

51

Key Takeaways

COPD care works best when physiology, phenotype and the patient's goals are considered together

1	**COPD is heterogeneous**	Persistent airflow obstruction results from different combinations of small-airway disease, emphysema, inflammation and exposures.
2	**Confirm the diagnosis**	Symptoms and risk factors should trigger post-bronchodilator spirometry — they do not replace it.
3	**Treat the patient's pattern**	Symptoms, exacerbations, eosinophils, comorbidities, device ability and access all influence treatment.
4	**Respect expiratory flow limitation**	During acute respiratory failure, NIV is first-line when appropriate; if intubated, allow enough time to exhale.
5	**Think beyond medications**	Smoking cessation, pulmonary rehabilitation, vaccination, oxygen for qualifying hypoxemia and selected advanced interventions matter.

The goal is not simply better numbers — it is better breathing, fewer exacerbations and better function.

Ref. 1

51

52

Selected References & Acknowledgment

Key sources used for the 2026 update

SELECTED REFERENCES

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52

53

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF COPD

THE END

Thank you

53

54