

# TOBACCO EXAMINER

A Monthly Newsletter of Writers Against Aids and Tobacco Smoking

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## Emphysema

Emphysema, progressive respiratory disease characterized by coughing, shortness of breath, and wheezing, developing into extreme difficulty in breathing, and sometimes resulting in disability and death. Although the exact cause is unknown, bronchial spasm, infection, irritation, or a combination of the three seem to be contributory. The highest degree of occurrence is among heavy cigarette smokers, especially those exposed to polluted air. Children who suffer from bronchitis or asthma are also susceptible. In recent years emphysema has become a serious public health problem in terms of rapidly increasing numbers of disabilities and deaths.

In the course of the disease the passages leading to the air sacs of the lungs become narrowed. Air is trapped in the sacs, and the tissues of the lungs lose their natural elasticity and undergo destructive changes. Symptoms akin to the common cold or asthmatic wheezing may result. As the disease progresses the volume of residual air trapped in the lungs increases, and the volume of each breath decreases. The lungs increase in size, and in severe cases the patient develops a characteristic "barrel chest." The lungs become unable to supply enough oxygen to the body tissues. This reduction in oxygen intake causes the heart to pump faster; consequently, the heart becomes strained. Excessive carbon dioxide in the blood gives the patient a bluish skin color.

Although the deterioration in the lungs brought about by emphysema is permanent and irreversible, treatment can give relief and increase functioning capacity. Abstention from smoking is essential, and change of occupation or residence may be necessary if air pollution or occupational pollution aggravates the condition. Bronchial dilators, special breathing exercises, and antibiotics are also helpful. Therapy is most successful in instances when the disease is diagnosed at an early stage.

The term *emphysema* is also used to describe infiltration of air into connective tissue and between air cells of the lungs.

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