



GRAND ROUNDS

A breath of fresh air is normally a good, healthy act. But for many people, especially at this time of year, a breath of any kind may be painful, difficult or tiring.

The cold, dry winter air of the Ottawa Valley can make life more difficult for those with breathing problems such as asthma, bronchitis, emphysema or any form of shortness of breath.

“They could be suffering unnecessarily,” says Maureen Magill, respiratory therapist at RVH.

She explains that there are a variety of treatments and interventions that can help people manage various breathing problems, once the root cause is identified.

“The goal is early diagnosis and treatment,” says Magill, explaining that persistent irritation can damage the airways within the lungs and cause long-term problems.

While we don’t always think about something as natural as breathing, Magill encourages everyone to be aware of changes in their ability to breathe. The symptoms of

chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can sneak up on a person, progressing slowly from an irritating cough or persistent phlegm in the throat to serious trouble catching your breath and a debilitating, long-term condition.

She refers to the Canadian Lung Health Test as a good place to start for anyone who might be concerned. It asks five basic questions:

- Do you cough regularly?
- Do you cough up phlegm regularly?
- Do even simple chores make you short of breath?
- Do you wheeze when you exert yourself, or at night?
- Do you get frequent colds that persist longer than those of other people you know?

The Canadian Lung Association recommends that anyone over 40 who is a current or ex-smoker should consult a health professional if they answer yes to any one of those five questions.

Preventative health care can, literally, make you breathe easier.

Magill says the first step should be to talk with your family doctor about your concerns, and ask about a pulmonary function test. It is a simple test, available at RVH, given by a respiratory therapist who asks you to blow into a device. The results give the health care team information about how the patient’s lungs are functioning, helping them diagnose the source of a problem and determine the best treatment.

“It gives us an important piece of the puzzle,” Magill explains.

Armed with accurate information, health care providers can begin to manage the problem. Early treatment can avoid or decrease further damage to the lungs.

There are a variety of ways patients can be helped. Support is available to help patients quit smoking—the primary cause of COPD and a major factor in lung

health. Health professionals can also coach patients with proper breathing techniques and exercises to help deepen your breath and pace your breathing during activity. Proper medications and bronchodilators (commonly known as “puffers”) can help patients minimize symptoms.

“We have a lot of tools to help,” says Magill, noting that the pulmonary function test is the key to that toolbox.



Braeden St. Michael prepares for a pulmonary function test with the assistance of RVH Respiratory Therapist Maureen Magill.