

**A survey of current and ex-smokers about  
their lung health**



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## Introduction

The BLF commissioned GFK NOP to conduct a survey of smokers and ex-smokers about their lung health. A total of 975 people aged 18+ were interviewed via a national representative telephone omnibus survey, of which 403 (41%) said they were current or ex-smokers. The following results are based on respondents who are current or ex-smokers. The survey took place between 9 and 11 October 2009.

The results showed that almost three-quarters (73%) of smokers and ex-smokers have not had a lung function test despite 21% of this group experiencing one or more of the following symptoms of COPD: persistent cough, breathlessness, wheezy chest, recurrent chest infections, excess phlegm and chest pain in the last 12 months.

## Executive Summary

1. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is an umbrella term for a number of conditions including chronic bronchitis and emphysema. It is a progressive, irreversible lung disease that kills around 30,000 people a year in the UK - more than breast, bowel or prostate cancer.
2. Early diagnosis of COPD is vital as it allows patients to take steps to slow down the progression of the disease, and live healthy lives for longer and avoid expensive emergency care.
3. However, not enough patients are diagnosed early enough. There are an estimated 3.7 million people in the UK with COPD, yet only 900,000 people, have been diagnosed with the disease. This leaves approximately 2.8 million people that are unaware they have the disease which, if left untreated, could severely restrict their lives and eventually kill them. Smokers and ex-smokers are most at risk of developing COPD.
4. The BLF have found that many smokers and ex-smokers do not consider having a lung function test despite having symptoms of COPD.
5. To find out the extent of this problem the British Lung Foundation commissioned GFK NOP to conduct a survey amongst adults aged 18+ who are current or ex smokers. A nationally representative survey of 403 adults aged 18+ was carried out 9 - 11 October 2009. Weighting was applied to the data to bring it in line with national profiles.
6. The survey found that almost three-quarters (73%) of smokers and ex-smokers have not had a lung function test despite 21% of this group experiencing one or more of the following symptoms of COPD: persistent cough, breathlessness, wheezy chest, recurrent chest infections, excess phlegm and chest pain in the last 12 months.

7. In addition to this, almost two in ten (19%) smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill and 8% said they had to stop to take a breath to keep up with friends walking on the flat. Nine respondents even reported that they were so breathless that they were unable to leave their house, yet had not considered having a lung function test.

## **Survey Methodology**

The BLF commissioned GFK NOP to conduct a survey of smokers and ex-smokers about their lung health. A total of 975 people aged 18+ were interviewed via a national representative telephone omnibus survey, of which 403 (41%) said they were current or ex smokers. The following results are based on respondents who are current or ex-smokers. The survey took place between 9 - 11 October 2009.

## **National Results (UK)**

### **Do you currently smoke, or have you ever smoked in the past?**

All respondents were asked if they currently smoked or had smoked in the past. 41% (403) of those questioned said yes they smoked or had smoked in the past.

**All 403 respondents who were smokers or ex-smokers were then asked the following questions:**

### **Have you, yourself, ever considered having a breathing (lung function) test?**

73% of smokers and ex-smokers surveyed said they had not had a lung function test, 22% said they have had one already, 5% said they been tested and diagnosed with a lung condition.

### **Which, if any, of the following symptoms have you experienced in the last 12 months?**

17% (69) of smokers and ex-smokers said they had experienced a wheezy chest, 14% (56) said they had had a persistent cough, 13% (54) said they had experienced breathing problems, 11% (43) said excess phlegm, 10% (38) said chest pain and 8% (33) said they had experienced recurrent chest infections in the last 12 months.

Out of the 73% of smokers who said they had not had a lung function test, 10% (30) said they had experienced a wheezy chest, 6% (18) breathing problems, 10% (33) persistent cough, 8% excess phlegm, 6% chest pain, and 4% recurrent chest infections.

### **In which, if any, of the following situations have you ever felt breathlessness or shortness of breath?**

37% (148) of smokers and ex-smokers said following strenuous exercise, 25% (101) said walking up a slight hill or hurrying, 14% (55) said keeping up with friends when walking and having to stop to take a breath, 12% (48) walking 100m and having to stop to take a breath, 5% (18) said not being able to leave the house because as they are too breathless.

Out of the 73% of smokers who had not had a lung function test, 33% (96) said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise, 19% (56) said they felt breathless after walking up a slight hill or hurrying, 8% (23) said they felt breathless and have to stop to take a breath when keeping up with friends when walking and a further 8% (25) said they have to stop to take a breath when walking 100m and 3% (9) said they were too breathless to leave the house.

## Key Regional Findings<sup>i</sup>

### Scotland

- 40% of respondents in Scotland said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 21% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 12% of this group said they have had breathing problems in the last 12 months
- 78% of smokers and ex-smokers in Scotland had not considered having a lung function test
- 43% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 30% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

### North

- 42% of respondents in the North said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 24% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 25% of this group said they have had breathing problems in the last 12 months
- 54% of smokers and ex-smokers in the North had not considered having a lung function test
- 43% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 17% said they felt breathless keeping up with friends when walking and have to stop to take a breath

### North West

- 50% of respondents in the North West said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 25% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 27% of this group said they have had a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 54% of smokers and ex-smokers in the North West had not considered having a lung function test
- 38% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 33% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

### Yorkshire and Humberside

- 40% of respondents in Yorkshire and Humberside said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 28% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 21% of this group said they have had excess phlegm in the last 12 months
- 69% of smokers and ex-smokers in Yorkshire and Humberside had not considered having a lung function test
- 49% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 32% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## **East Midlands**

- 34% of respondents in the East Midlands said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 5% said they have had a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 9% of this group said they have had excess phlegm in last 12 months
- 79% of smokers and ex-smokers in the East Midlands had not considered having a lung function test
- 37% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 9% said they felt breathless keeping up with friends when walking and have to stop to take a breath

## **Wales**

- 35% of respondents in Wales said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 15% said they had experienced chest pain in the last 12 months
- 13% of this group said they have had recurrent chest infections in the last 12 months
- 61% of smokers and ex-smokers in Wales had not considered having a lung function test
- 40% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 31% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## **Anglia**

- 33% of respondents in Anglia said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 20% of this group said they had experienced breathing problems in the last 12 months
- 19% said they have had excess phlegm in the last 12 months
- 84% of smokers and ex-smokers in Anglia had not considered having a lung function test
- 29% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 29% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## **West Midlands**

- 46% of respondents in the West Midlands said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 18% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 14% of this group said they have had a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 79% of smokers and ex-smokers in the West Midlands had not considered having a lung function test
- 23% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 17% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## South West

- 41% of respondents in the South West said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 22% of this group said they had a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 22% said they had recurrent chest infections in the last 12 months
- 68% of smokers and ex-smokers in the South West had not considered having a lung function test
- 42% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 15% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## London

- 38% of respondents in London said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 13% of this group said they had a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 13% of this group said they has breathing problems in the last 12 months
- 83% of smokers and ex-smokers in London had not considered having a lung function test
- 40% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying and 33% said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise

## South East

- 42% of respondents in the South East said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 15% of this group said they has breathing problems in the last 12 months
- 13% of this group said they had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 74% of smokers and ex-smokers in the South East had not considered having a lung function test
- 37% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 24% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## Northern Ireland

- 52% of respondents in Northern Ireland said they were either current or ex-smokers
- 27% of this group said they have had a wheezy chest in the last 12 months
- 24% of this group said they had experienced a persistent cough in the last 12 months
- 74% of smokers and ex-smokers in Northern Ireland had not considered having a lung function test
- 20% of smokers and ex-smokers said they felt breathless following strenuous exercise and 14% said they felt breathless walking up a slight hill or hurrying

## Conclusion

This survey has uncovered a continuing, disturbing ignorance of COPD among smokers and ex-smokers, the people who are at most at risk of developing this lung condition. In order to diagnose and treat chronic lung disease early, it is crucial to persuade people with symptoms to seek medical advice. These results add to existing evidence that lung function testing should be included as part of the Government's 'Health MOT' (NHS Health Check) programme to ensure those at risk of chronic lung disease are found at an earlier stage and treated.

<sup>i</sup> Low base sizes in all regions except North West and South East