

Spirometry: A Simple Test for Breathing Problems

What is spirometry?

It is a test that measures how much and how quickly you can move air in and out of your lungs compared with other people who have breathing problems like yours. For the test, you will blow through a tube as hard, as fast, and as long as you can. After that, you may be given medicine to inhale. Then, after several minutes, you repeat the test to see if the medicine helps your lungs work better. This test can be done in a doctor's office or at a pulmonary (lung) lab at a hospital.

Why would I need to take a spirometry test?

Doctors often order this test if you are having problems breathing. This can include coughing a lot, waking up at night short of breath, wheezing, or getting short of breath with exercise.

What will my doctor do with the results?

Spirometry results will help your doctor figure out whether you might have asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), or another lung problem. Sometimes more testing is needed. If you have asthma or COPD, there are medicines that can help you breathe more easily. If you are taking a medicine to help your lungs work better, your doctor might order more spirometry tests to see how well your lungs are working with the medicine.

What if I have asthma or COPD?

Asthma—If your test shows that you have asthma, your doctor will ask you more questions about how often you are having trouble breathing. Several types of inhalers can help treat asthma, depending on how bad you are feeling, how often you feel that way, and what your test results look like. Your doctor will also recommend you quit smoking if you smoke.

COPD—Different inhalers and pills are available for people with COPD. Quitting smoking and avoiding secondhand smoke is the best thing a person can do to improve lung function. Pulmonary (lung) rehab is a medical program to help patients live and breathe better. Some patients with COPD will eventually need oxygen to help them breathe more easily.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

Medline

<https://medlineplus.gov/lab-tests/lung-function-tests/>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

<https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/LMBBasthma>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<https://www.cdc.gov/copd/basics-about.html>

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