Getting a Lung Transplant for COPD

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How to Qualify and What to Expect After a Lung Transplant

When medication, physical therapy and exercise can no longer control COPD symptoms, a transplant may be considered. A lung transplant aims to improve breathing, which will also improve energy and quality of life for at least 3 to 4 years after the surgery. However, a transplant is not the answer for everyone: your body and mind must fit the criteria for surgery and the demands of post-transplant life.

When a Lung Transplant Is the Right Decision

In some advanced cases of COPD, the benefits of a single or double lung transplant may be worth the inherent risks. To be eligible for a transplant, COPD patients must be:

- **Smoke-free.** Quitting smoking is an important prerequisite for a transplant, but it isn't a guarantee. Hospitals require that you be smoke-free and nicotine-free for several months before you can even be put on the transplant list.
- **Younger than 65.** Advanced age can complicate surgery and recovery. Although exceptions can be made, patients over 65 are generally considered unsuitable for a single lung transplant (60 is the upper age limit for a double lung transplant).
- **Free of addiction and psychological issues.** A drug or alcohol addiction will eliminate your chances of a transplant, as will a serious mental health condition that could interfere with your post-transplant treatment.
- **Cancer-free.** You are unlikely to be considered for a transplant if you have a recent history of cancer since there's a risk that it could spread into your new lung. However, your medical team will decide whether your case is worth the risk.
- **At the right stage of disease.** Although COPD must be sufficiently advanced to call for a lung transplant, the condition can't be so advanced that you would be too weak to survive the surgery.

You may need to take some tests to measure your state of health, and your medical team will likely make some judgment calls based on your particular circumstances. For instance, the severity of your breathing issues, your blood and tissue type, and your support network will all play a role in your chance for success. If your doctors decide you have met all the initial conditions for a transplant, you'll receive a more thorough assessment from a specialized transplant team.

What to Expect in a Transplant Assessment

Expect to undergo a transplant assessment To ensure you're a good candidate for a transplant. An assessment involves several tests, including:

- Blood work.
- Chest x-rays.

- Exercise tests.
- Lung function tests.
- Echocardiogram and electrocardiogram (ECG).
- Psychological profiles.

The transplant team will decide whether your results warrant a spot on the active waiting list, if you need a second opinion, or if you don't qualify for a transplant. In some cases, patients must wait until their COPD is more advanced to qualify, so close monitoring might be your only course of action for now.

Recovery and Life after a Transplant

A successful lung transplant will help you lead a more active and comfortable life, but this comes at a cost. There's always a risk that your body will reject your new organ, even if you take your medication religiously. And while your medications will be vital for your well-being, they also affect your immunity, so you need to take more measures to avoid illness and disease. Life after a transplant is demanding, but staying committed to your medical requirements and important lifestyle changes will help you avoid complications down the road.