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November 16: Patients, health care professionals, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies are coming together today to take action against one of the world's most prevalent respiratory diseases. The illness, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), is a non-communicable lung disease that progressively robs sufferers of breath. COPD is the fourth leading cause of death worldwide¹, causing more than 3 million deaths every year², and up to half of people with the disease don't know they have it.

Today is the 15th annual World COPD Day, an event held each November to raise awareness of COPD worldwide. World COPD Day is organized by the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease, or GOLD (www.goldcopd.org), a World Health Organization collaborative and 501(c)3 organization. This year's World COPD Day theme, "**Breathe In The Knowledge**," emphasizes the meaningful actions patients can take to improve their respiratory health, at any stage before or after a COPD diagnosis. This year's event coincides with the launch of the 2017 Global Strategy for the Diagnosis, Management and Prevention of COPD, a report which assists practitioners around the world in the fight against COPD.

COPD is diagnosed using a breathing test called spirometry. This test, which is painless and takes only a few minutes, measures the amount of air a person can breathe out, and the amount of time taken to do so. Researchers are also studying additional ways to identify COPD earlier in the course of disease.

"Increased patient education and global efforts to improve early diagnosis are helping to impact the growing burden of COPD. Smoking cessation programs and interest in developing new treatments as well as efforts to better predict patients' prognoses are leading to renewed optimism in this fight. We have a tremendous amount of work ahead of us in this area, but GOLD is dedicated to assisting practitioners around the world by providing best practice strategy for COPD." says Rebecca Decker, Program Director of the Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease.

The early stages of COPD are often unrecognized, in part because many individuals discount symptoms such as breathlessness, chronic cough, and bringing up phlegm as a normal part of getting older or an expected consequence of cigarette smoking.

There is no cure for COPD, which may also contribute to underdiagnosis of the disease. People whose breathlessness is more severe may find the possibility of finding out that they have COPD frightening, and avoid seeking treatment.

COPD occurs most often in patients who are over age 40 and who have a history of exposure to COPD risk factors. Worldwide, the most commonly encountered risk factor for COPD is cigarette smoking. Other important risk factors include dusts and chemicals encountered on the job and smoke from biomass fuels burned for cooking and heating in poorly ventilated dwellings, especially in developing countries.

Patients may be able to slow or even stop the progress of COPD by reducing their exposure to risk factors for the disease. "For people who smoke, the most effective strategy to prevent COPD or slow its progression is to quit smoking," says Dr. Claus Vogelmeier, Chair of the GOLD Science Committee. "It's never too late to quit smoking."

In addition, GOLD leaders emphasize that not just cigarettes but other forms of tobacco smoking such as water-pipe smoking are dangerous for the lungs. And because the potential damaging effects of E-cigarettes in the lungs are unknown, these should be considered like regular cigarettes until more information is available. Likewise, the role of E-cigarettes in helping smokers quit is not yet established.

Without treatment, COPD is generally a progressive disease, and as the disease gets worse patients become breathless during everyday activities such as climbing a flight of stairs, walking the dog, or even getting washed and dressed in the morning.

COPD treatment is most effective when begun early in the course of the disease. However, at all stages of disease, treatments are available that reduce symptoms such as breathlessness and enable people to participate more fully in daily life.

World COPD Day was first held in 2002, and has grown each year to become one of the most important COPD events globally. On World COPD Day, hundreds of awareness-raising activities will take place in countries all over the world. Further information about GOLD and World COPD Day can be found at www.goldcopd.org. Documents detailing GOLD's global strategy for diagnosis, management, and prevention of COPD are also available at www.goldcopd.org.

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References:

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2. Lopez AD, Shibuya K, Rao C, Mathers CD, Hansell AL, Held LS, *et al*. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease: current burden and future projections. *Eur Respir J* 2006;27(2):397-412.
3. Halbert RJ, Natoli JL, Gano A, Badamgarav E, Buist AS, Mannino DM. Global burden of COPD: systematic review and meta-analysis. *Eur Respir J* 2006; 28: 523–32.