# Personalized COPD care: Is your current approach missing the mark?

Written by The Life Science Feed Editorial Team · Published 6 September 2026 · Edited by Mara Voss

> Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, characterized by persistent respiratory symptoms and airflow limitation. Despite established guidelines, a significant unmet need persists for therapies that can effectively halt disease progression or reverse established lung damage. The challenge lies in the disease's heterogeneous nature, making a one-size-fits-all approach increasingly inadequate.

**KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The Pivot: Management strategies are shifting towards personalized, phenotype-driven interventions rather than broad, symptom-based approaches.
- The Data: No specific numeric data from trials is available for this general overview.
- The Action: Clinicians should consider a more granular assessment of COPD phenotypes to optimize therapeutic selection and improve patient outcomes.

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a progressive lung condition, affects millions globally, imposing a substantial burden on healthcare systems and individual quality of life. The disease is primarily characterized by persistent respiratory symptoms and airflow limitation that is not fully reversible. Its pathogenesis involves a complex relationship of genetic predispositions, environmental exposures (most notably cigarette smoke), and inflammatory processes that lead to irreversible damage to the airways and lung parenchyma. This damage manifests as chronic bronchitis, emphysema, or a combination of both, each contributing to the patient's overall clinical presentation and disease trajectory.

Current management strategies for COPD aim to reduce symptoms, decrease the frequency and severity of exacerbations, and improve exercise tolerance and overall health status. These strategies typically involve smoking cessation, bronchodilator therapy (long-acting muscarinic antagonists (LAMAs) and long-acting beta-agonists (LABAs)), inhaled corticosteroids (ICS) for specific patient groups, and pulmonary rehabilitation. Despite these interventions, many patients continue to experience significant disease progression, frequent exacerbations, and a decline in lung function, highlighting the limitations of existing treatments and the urgent need for more effective, targeted therapies. The heterogeneity of COPD, with distinct clinical, physiological, and inflammatory phenotypes, suggests that a more personalized approach to treatment may yield better results.

## Understanding COPD Phenotypes

The concept of COPD phenotypes has gained considerable traction in recent years, moving beyond the traditional classification based solely on spirometry. Phenotypes are defined by observable characteristics that result from the interaction of genes and environment, distinguishing subgroups of patients who may respond differently to specific treatments. Recognizing these distinct phenotypes is important for tailoring therapy, as a treatment effective for one subgroup might be less beneficial or even harmful for another. For instance, patients with frequent exacerbations, particularly those with an eosinophilic inflammatory component, often respond well to inhaled corticosteroids, whereas those with predominantly emphysematous disease may benefit more from bronchodilator optimization and lung volume reduction strategies.

One well-recognized phenotype is the 'frequent exacerbator', characterized by two or more moderate exacerbations or one severe exacerbation requiring hospitalization per year. These patients experience a faster decline in lung function and a poorer quality of life. Another important phenotype is the 'emphysema-dominant' type, where patients primarily exhibit destruction of alveolar walls, leading to reduced gas exchange capacity and often severe dyspnea. Conversely, the 'chronic bronchitis' phenotype is marked by chronic cough and sputum production, often associated with small airway disease and mucus hypersecretion. Identifying these phenotypes requires a comprehensive assessment that goes beyond routine spirometry, incorporating imaging (CT scans), inflammatory biomarkers (blood eosinophil counts), and detailed clinical history.

## The Role of Biomarkers and Imaging

Biomarkers play an increasingly important role in refining COPD phenotyping and guiding therapeutic decisions. Blood eosinophil count is perhaps the most widely studied and clinically applied biomarker in COPD. Elevated eosinophil counts are associated with an increased risk of exacerbations and a greater likelihood of response to ICS therapy. This has led to recommendations for using eosinophil counts to help determine which patients are most likely to benefit from ICS, thereby reducing unnecessary exposure to steroids in those unlikely to respond and minimizing potential side effects. Other biomarkers, such as C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), reflect systemic inflammation and may identify patients at higher risk for cardiovascular comorbidities, a common and often under-recognized aspect of COPD.

Advanced imaging techniques, particularly high-resolution computed tomography (HRCT), provide invaluable insights into the structural changes within the lungs, allowing for a more precise characterization of emphysema and airway disease. Quantitative CT analysis can measure the extent and distribution of emphysema, the thickness of airway walls, and the degree of gas trapping. This detailed anatomical information can guide interventions such as lung volume reduction surgery or endobronchial valve placement for severe emphysema. For a deeper understanding of how imaging advances are refining cardiopulmonary assessment, clinicians might review CPET advances in cardiopulmonary disease assessment, which often complements imaging findings.

## Emerging Therapeutic Strategies

Beyond traditional bronchodilators and corticosteroids, the pipeline for COPD therapies includes several novel approaches targeting specific inflammatory pathways and disease mechanisms. These include phosphodiesterase-4 (PDE4) inhibitors, which reduce inflammation and mucus production, particularly beneficial for patients with chronic bronchitis and a history of exacerbations. Roflumilast, an oral PDE4 inhibitor, has demonstrated efficacy in reducing

exacerbations in severe COPD patients with chronic bronchitis. Other investigational therapies are exploring the inhibition of various cytokines and chemokines involved in COPD pathogenesis, such as IL-5, IL-13, and IL-33. The role of IL-33 in particular, with its dual involvement in inflammation and mucus dysfunction, is a subject of ongoing research, as outlined in IL-33's dual role in COPD.

Biologic therapies, already established in severe asthma, are also being investigated for specific COPD phenotypes, especially those with persistent eosinophilic inflammation despite maximal conventional therapy. These agents, such as anti-IL-5 antibodies, aim to reduce eosinophil counts and thereby decrease exacerbation rates. While not yet standard of care for COPD, their potential to offer targeted relief for a subset of patients is considerable. The development of these therapies highlights the shift towards precision medicine in respiratory diseases, moving away from a broad-spectrum approach to one that matches the right treatment to the right patient.

Non-pharmacological interventions also continue to evolve. Pulmonary rehabilitation remains a cornerstone of COPD management, improving exercise capacity, dyspnea, and quality of life. New modalities within pulmonary rehabilitation, including telerehabilitation and home-based programs, are expanding access to this vital therapy. Nutritional support and psychological interventions are also gaining recognition for their importance in holistic patient care. The management of comorbidities, such as cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis, and anxiety/depression, is increasingly integrated into comprehensive COPD care plans, recognizing their significant impact on patient outcomes.

## Challenges and Unmet Needs

Despite these advances, several challenges persist in COPD management. Adherence to inhaled therapies remains a significant issue, often due to complex device usage, poor technique, or lack of understanding of the treatment's importance. Simplifying inhaler regimens and providing thorough patient education are essential for patient outcomes. The early diagnosis of COPD is another persistent problem; many patients are diagnosed only after significant lung function has been lost. Implementing spirometry screening in primary care settings could facilitate earlier detection and intervention.

The impact of air pollution, both indoor and outdoor, continues to contribute to COPD incidence and progression, particularly in developing countries. Addressing these environmental factors requires public health initiatives and policy changes. But, even in developed nations, occupational exposures and continued smoking in some populations present ongoing challenges. For clinicians seeking a comprehensive reference on respiratory conditions, the Oxford Handbook of Respiratory Medicine offers a concise guide to modern pulmonology.

The development of therapies that can modify the underlying disease process, rather than just manage symptoms, remains the ultimate goal. Current treatments can slow the rate of decline in lung function in some patients, but none can fully reverse the damage or prevent progression in all cases. Research into lung regeneration and repair mechanisms, though still in early stages, holds promise for future breakthroughs. The heterogeneity of COPD also means that trials often struggle to show a universal benefit, necessitating larger, more stratified studies to identify specific responders.

The integration of digital health technologies, such as remote monitoring and telehealth, offers opportunities to improve patient engagement, track symptoms, and manage exacerbations more proactively. These tools can provide real-time data to clinicians, allowing for timely adjustments to treatment plans and potentially reducing hospital admissions. But, ensuring equitable access to these technologies and integrating them seamlessly into clinical workflows are important considerations. The field is also exploring the potential of triple therapy in optimising COPD outcomes, particularly for

patients with severe disease and frequent exacerbations.

The open-label design of many real-world observational studies is an obvious caveat when comparing different treatment approaches, as it introduces potential for bias. While randomized controlled trials provide the highest level of evidence, their strict inclusion criteria may limit generalizability to the broader COPD population. The trial was not powered to detect differences in rare subgroups, and that gap matters for personalized medicine. Whether benefits extend to broader groups of patients, beyond those with specific inflammatory markers or severe disease, remains unclear and requires further investigation. The next generation of trials needs to focus on these specific patient populations to truly advance the field.

### CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

The shift towards phenotype-guided management in COPD is not merely academic; it demands a more granular approach from clinicians. Relying solely on spirometry and symptom severity to guide therapy is increasingly insufficient. We must integrate biomarkers, particularly blood eosinophil counts, and consider advanced imaging to truly personalize treatment, moving beyond the traditional 'ABCD' assessment.

This evolving understanding means that a patient with frequent exacerbations and elevated eosinophils should be managed differently from one with predominantly emphysematous disease and low eosinophils. Ignoring these distinctions risks suboptimal outcomes, exposing patients to ineffective treatments or unnecessary side effects. The industry, in turn, must continue to develop and test therapies that target these specific phenotypes, rather than pursuing broad-spectrum agents that may only offer marginal benefits across a heterogeneous population.

For patients, this means a more tailored and potentially more effective treatment pathway. But it also places a greater onus on accurate diagnosis and detailed phenotyping, which requires access to specialized tests and expertise. Primary care physicians, therefore, need robust referral pathways and clear guidance on when and how to identify these distinct patient subgroups, ensuring that the benefits of precision medicine reach those who need it most.



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