

Tiny Lung Valve Eases Breathing in Emphysema/ COPD Patients

By Sam Kennedy

St. Luke's now offers a new pencil-eraser-shaped device, call the Zephyr endobronchial valve, that helps patients with advanced emphysema or COPD breathe easier.

This relief-valve-like device is inserted without surgery or incisions into damaged areas of the lung to help air to escape. Charles Gadwell says he can feel his lungs working better since St. Luke's Pulmonologist Deborah Stahlnecker, DO, inserted three Zephyr valves into his left lung in February.

"I feel pretty good," says the former Marine, National Guardsman and Post Office employee who had struggled with emphysema after a half-century of smoking, before quitting in 2015.

Emphysema or COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) are caused when lung tissue becomes diseased or damaged from cigarette smoking or inhaled toxic chemicals/substances. There is no cure for this debilitating, sometimes fatal condition, which may require the patient to use supplemental oxygen. Treatment with medication inhalers can be effective in some patients, but advanced COPD cases often require a lung transplant or lung reduction surgery for patient survival and improvement of symptoms.

Patients who have the Zephyr valves placed into the most damaged recesses of lung tissue, report improved lung function, better breathing during daily walks and other activities and an overall enhanced quality of life, says Dr. Stahlnecker, who is the only physician in the Lehigh Valley area currently performing this minimally invasive procedure. The Pulmonx Zephyr valve was approved by the FDA in 2018; it is the first device of its kind to be made commercially available in the United States.

Gadwell, 73, of Whitehall, who describes himself as "never one to sit," was back on his feet a few days after the valves were implanted. Now he's walking more than a mile each day with a goal of reaching one-and-a-half miles eventually. He's grateful that St. Luke's and Dr. Stahlnecker offered this new treatment that has improved his lung function.

Dr. Stahlnecker uses a long camera-tipped tube, called a bronchoscope, to implant this barrel-shaped, hollow device with a flared end through the patient's mouth and into the lung. Because of the often-extensive tissue damage common to COPD, it is often necessary to implant multiple valves into the lung. During this procedure, which takes about an hour, the patient is under general anesthesia. No cutting is required to access the diseased tissue or affix the valve within the lung, as it is designed to expand to fit the airway into which it is placed.



Zephyr® Valve, image courtesy of Pulmonx®



Hike Healthy: Avoiding COVID-19 infection on the Appalachian Trail

COVID-19 (commonly referred to as "Coronavirus") is a highly contagious respiratory virus that has been diagnosed in the majority of the states along the Appalachian Trail (A.T.). Initial symptoms of COVID-19 appear between 2-14 days after exposure to the virus and include fever, cough, and shortness of breath. However, some may experience more severe symptoms, including difficulty breathing, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, confusion or inability to arouse, and bluish lips or face. Those who experience any of these symptoms should seek immediate medical attention.

In order to minimize your risks of contracting COVID-19, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy recommends that all hikers follow the guidelines below, which are based on recommendations by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the World Health Organization.

- **Wash your hands** frequently with biodegradable soap at least 200 feet from water sources. When soap is not available, use hand sanitizer that contains 60-95% alcohol.
- **Avoid sharing food.** Do not eat out of the same food bag, share utensils or drink from other hikers' water bottles.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.**
- **Cover your mouth when coughing or sneezing.** Use a tissue and dispose of it using Leave No Trace Principles
- **Keep some distance** between you and other hikers whenever possible, especially if anyone shows signs of being sick. Avoid shaking hands or other close contact — instead, elbow bumps or waving are safer ways to greet others.
- **Avoid congregating in groups** along the Trail.
- If you are an older adult or have serious chronic medical conditions like heart disease, diabetes or lung disease, you are at a higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19 disease. Hike and camp away from others to minimize the likelihood of infection.
- If you begin feeling sick, **stay away from others and get off the Trail** until examined and cleared for return to the Trail by a medical professional.
- If you are diagnosed with COVID-19 while on the A.T., please submit a report to the ATC with as much detail as possible using the form at <https://appalachiantrail.org/report-covid-19>.

For more information about COVID-19 and prevention tips, please visit cdc.gov/covid19.

For additional information on how the COVID-19 outbreak is affecting Appalachian Trail facilities and ATC visitor centers, please visit appalachiantrail.org/updates.



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