

Trouble Breathing (Shortness of Breath)

Shortness of breath is an uncomfortable feeling of having trouble breathing. You may feel like you cannot catch your breath, like the room is closing in or like there is not enough air in the room. It is a unique experience for each person.

Signs and symptoms

- A restless or anxious feeling
- A feeling as though you are not getting enough air
- Tiredness
- Fast breathing
- Shortness of breath may also cause feelings of fear, nervousness, helplessness, anger, frustration, or sadness

There are also some things that may cause or increase feelings of shortness of breath:

- Anxiety
- Movement
- Exercise
- Posture
- Coughing
- Secretions
- Climate, especially heat and humidity
- Infection

What can help relieve breathing trouble?

The team will try to discover the underlying cause of your breathing trouble and discuss treatments with your doctor. There are several ways to help decrease these feelings:

- **Medications:** Many different types of medicines can help improve shortness of breath such as narcotics, steroids, or inhalers.
- **Oxygen therapy:** Not everyone will benefit from oxygen. Your nurse will assess your breathing comfort at each visit and discuss the need for oxygen with your doctor. Use oxygen only as directed by your care team.
- Try to identify what increases your feeling of breathlessness and let your care team know. They can then help you to plan activities so you can breathe more easily.
- **Conserve energy.** Rearrange your environment to reduce exertion. For example, move your phone next to where you sit or lie. Move your chair or bed as close as possible to the bathroom.
- Plan activities to conserve energy. Schedule activities so that you have rest time. For example, eat first, then rest, then bathe. Also, try to conserve energy so that you can do those things you find enjoyable; for example, rest before going out.
- Position yourself to help with chest expansion. Sitting upright and leaning forward helps air to move in and out of the lungs. You may also find that lying on one side more than the other helps. Try placing pillows under both arms when in bed.
- Eliminate allergens like smoke, dust, and mold.
- Use a cool mist humidifier to increase the moisture in the room. Increase air movement by using an open window or fan.
- Focus on your breathing; take slow, deep breaths or use breathing exercises that the care team has taught you.
- Try relaxation techniques, music, and visualization. Your care team can suggest techniques and teach you how to use them.
- Be sure clothing around the neck and chest is loose and lightweight.

- Breathing through your mouth may cause dryness. Try ice chips or a cold, moist washcloth to relieve feelings of dryness of the mouth.