



Shortness of Breath

Every person experiences shortness of breath from time to time, usually after intense physical activity. If it lasts a short while and is not too severe, we don't think much about it. But some people experience shortness of breath that doesn't go away—it can be continuous or come and go—and for these people, shortness of breath may be a very distressing symptom.

When Shortness of Breath is Chronic, It May Be Caused by:

- Diseases of the airways and lungs, such as emphysema or chronic bronchitis
- Cancer or chronic infection in the lungs
- Diseases of the heart, such as congestive heart failure
- Severe anemia (low iron in the blood)
- Conditions that limit the movement of air, such as fluid in the chest cavity or fluid in the belly
- Anxiety and panic attacks

The Doctor's Approach to Shortness of Breath

If you develop shortness of breath at rest or with little activity, or if your shortness of breath increases, tell your doctor. Many conditions can cause shortness of breath, and to make a diagnosis, a doctor will ask questions and examine you, and often request various types of tests, including a measurement of the oxygen level in the blood, various x-rays and other types of blood tests.

Finding the cause will help your doctor decide on treatment. If the oxygen level in the blood is low, the physician will prescribe oxygen. Oxygen treatment can be obtained at home. Someone will come and teach you and your family how to use the oxygen safely.

If the doctor determines that there is a spasm of the airways, he or she will probably prescribe inhalers that relax the airways. If this occurs, make sure that

you know how to use the inhaler. Usually a nurse or pharmacist will show you.

The doctor may treat other problems that may be causing shortness of breath. If the underlying problem can be helped, the symptom usually improves.

If your shortness of breath is distressing and the doctor is unable to find a cause that can be easily and quickly treated, he or she may recommend a medication specifically for the treatment of shortness of breath. The medications that may work include opioid drugs (usually used to treat severe pain, but also effective in this situation), steroid medications, and various drugs used to treat anxiety and other mental problems (but also may be helpful for shortness of breath).

What Can You Do To Help?

To help with shortness of breath, a person can try a variety of approaches:

- If breathing is easier while sitting up, plan to rest and sleep in a reclining chair rather than a flat bed, or use pillows to keep your head raised on the bed.
- Try breathing with your lips pursed, as if you were about to whistle. (See instructions below.)
- Use a fan to create a breeze into your face.
- If you feel better staying away from cramped spaces, try staying in a room with a window.
- Learn techniques that produce a calm state, such as listening to music or meditating.

Your doctor may have other suggestions. If you smoke, you may have been told to stop. Never smoke if there is oxygen being given.

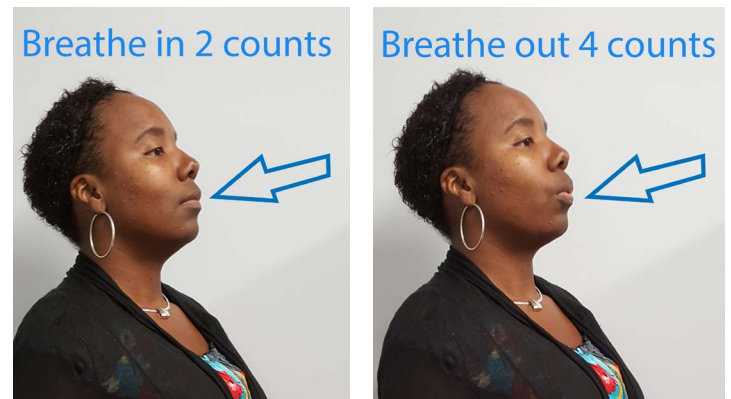
Keeping A Diary

Ask your doctor whether it would be helpful to keep a diary of your shortness of breath so that you can provide accurate information about how you feel. If you do, include the following information:

- When did you experience shortness of breath?
- How long did it last?
- Provide a number for your symptom on a scale of 0-10, where zero (0) = no shortness of breath and 10 = worst shortness of breath.
- Did you notice anything that made your shortness of breath worse?
- What made the shortness of breath better?
- How are you reacting to oxygen therapy, to inhalers, or to medications?

How to do pursed lip breathing:

1. Breathe in (inhale) slowly through your nose for 2 counts.
2. Feel your belly get larger as you breathe in.
3. Pucker your lips, as if you were going to whistle or blow out a candle.
4. Breathe out (exhale) slowly through your lips for 4 or more counts.
5. Exhale normally. Do not force air out.
6. Do not hold your breath when you are doing pursed lip breathing.
7. Repeat these steps until your breathing slows.



Patient Education Series

Shortness of Breath

When your symptoms are managed, you will:

- Enjoy activities and have more energy
- Enjoy family and friends
- Feel less stress and anxiety
- Get better sleep at night
- Have a better quality of life

This educational material is provided by the Palliative Care Project, a partnership between Community Care of Brooklyn and the MJHS Institute for Innovation in Palliative Care.