

How to Manage your Shortness of Breath

What is shortness of breath?

Shortness of breath is the feeling of not having enough air to breathe. It can also be an uncomfortable feeling while you are breathing. You can have shortness of breath when resting or when you are doing something physical, no matter how small the activity.

People with shortness of breath often say they feel:

- Anxious
- Frightened
- Nervous
- Panicky
- Very breathless

What causes shortness of breath?

- Muscle weakness
- Blood clot
- Smoking
- Fluid around the lung (pleural effusion)
- Lung disease like Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or emphysema
- Infection, like pneumonia
- Low blood count
- Side effects from treatment
- Anxiety and depression
- Low oxygen levels
- Blockage in your airway

What happens during shortness of breath?

- Breathing gets shallower and faster and you may feel like you are not getting as much oxygen when you inhale
- Muscles then begin to tense and you start to feel nervous to do things
- Fear of not being able to breathe makes your shortness of breath worse

What can I do to manage my shortness of breath?

Learn breathing exercises and positions

Breathing exercises can be helpful, especially if you have severe shortness of breath.

Abdominal breathing

This type of breathing can help you recover from feeling breathless after an activity.

Follow these steps:

1. Relax your shoulders.
2. Place one hand on your abdomen (belly) just below your chest.
3. Count 1, 2, 3, 4, as you take a breath in and feel your abdomen rise slowly.
4. Breathe out slowly with pursed lips (like you are whistling or blowing out a candle) as you count 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.
5. Repeat this 3-4 times.

Practice this 3 times a day and before and after doing an activity.

Recovery breathing

Use this exercise any time you feel very breathless or panicky. You can practice it while sitting, standing, or lying down.

Follow these steps:

1. Drop your chin.
2. Breathe in and out while focusing on your breath.
3. Purse your lips.
4. Little by little, blow out for long periods.
5. Once your breathing slows down, sit up straight and do 2 or 3 more abdominal breaths.
6. Rest for a few minutes before starting your activities again.

Make lifestyle changes

- Take your medications as prescribed. There are some medications that can help shortness of breath.
- Do things in ways that use less energy. Avoid heavy lifting and carry things at your waist or close to your chest. Rest as much as you need to.
- Pace yourself. Plan your activities so that you have time to do them slowly and comfortably. Keep things that you use often close by and within easy reach.
- Shortness of breath can make you feel worried or anxious. Share your feelings with family, friends and your health care team.
- Be active. You can do small amounts of exercise by taking it slowly. Use abdominal breathing as much as possible.
- Use abdominal breathing when walking up slopes, climbing stairs or standing up. When climbing up stairs, stand close to the stairs with one hand on the railing beside you. Breathe in as you lift your leg up and breathe out as you place your leg on the step and raise yourself up.
- Change the way you eat. Chew your food slowly, taking breaks in between bites and try eating smaller meals more often.

Use devices to help you save energy

Some devices can help to cut down on the work your body needs to do in order to breathe.

- Use pillows to raise your head when lying down
- Use a reclining chair with a footrest when sitting
- Use a walker or wheelchair if you need them
- Ask about using a bedrail, bath board, or other safety equipment
- Try using a cool fan across your face to breathe easier

Change your environment

Avoid things that can cause shortness of breath like smoking, perfume, flowers and pets. Try opening a window or using a fan to get fresh air if the weather is good. Stay inside when the weather is very hot or cold.

Quit smoking

Smoking can make your shortness of breath worse. Your pharmacist or family doctor can help you make a plan to quit smoking. They can:

- Suggest nicotine replacements (like the patch or gum)
- Prescribe medication to help you quit
- Help you keep track of your progress

When should I talk to my health care team?

Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:

- Breathing that has become harder over a short period of time
- You are struggling to breathe and feel very nervous
- A sharp pain when you cough or take a deep breath
- A fever of 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time or 38°C (100.4°F) or higher for at least one hour
- A new cough or one that is getting worse
- Noisy breathing



Call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department if you ever have:

- Breathing problems with dizziness, an increased heart rate or very pale skin.
- A sudden, new or increasing chest pain.
- Sudden shortness of breath when you wake up.

For more information, talk to your health care team or visit www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms



Information adapted from Cancer Care Ontario's How to Manage Your Symptoms - patient guides.

This is information only and does not replace medical advice. Always ask your health care provider if you have any questions or concerns.