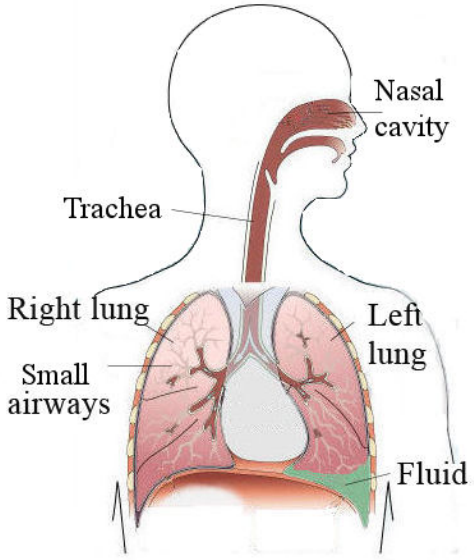
Shortness of Breath
(Dyspnea)

Shortness of breath (*dyspnea*) is the feeling of uneasy breathing. Shortness of breath does not always mean that there is a life threatening illness. Dyspnea needs care right away.



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CAUSES

The list of causes for shortness of breath is very long and includes:

- Not enough oxygen in the air (as with high altitudes or with a smoke-filled room).
- Acute lung disease.
  - Infections such as pneumonia.
  - Fluid in the lungs, such as heart failure.
  - Blood clot in the lungs (*pulmonary embolism*).
- Lasting (*chronic*) lung diseases.
- Heart Disease (heart attack, angina, congestive heart failure and others).
- Low red blood cells (*anemia*).
- Poor physical fitness can cause shortness of breath with exercise.
- Chest or back injuries or stiffness.
- Being overweight (*obese*) can make it hard to breath.
- Anxiety can make you feel like you are not getting enough air even though everything is all right.

DIAGNOSIS

Many tests may be done to find why you are having shortness of breath. Tests include:

- Chest X-rays.
- Lung function tests.
- Blood tests.
- Electrocardiogram.
- Exercise testing.
- A cardiac echo.
- Scans.

Serious medical problems will usually be found during your exam.

Your caregiver may not be able to find a cause for your shortness of breath after looking at you. In this case, it is important to have a follow-up and exam with your caregiver after a period of time.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- **Do not smoke**. Smoking is a common cause of shortness of breath. Ask for help to stop smoking.
- Avoid being around chemicals that may bother your breathing (paint fumes, dust, etc.).
- Rest as needed. Slowly begin your usual activities.
- If medications were prescribed, take them as directed for the full length of time directed. This includes oxygen and any inhaled medications, if prescribed.
- It is very important that you follow up with your caregiver or other physician as directed. Waiting to do so or failure to follow-up could result in worsening of your condition and possible disability or death.
- Be sure you understand what to do or who to call if your shortness of breath worsens.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your condition does not improve in the time expected.
- You have a hard time doing your normal activities even with rest.
- You have any side effects from or problems with medications prescribed.
- You develop any new symptoms not discussed below.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You feel your shortness of breath is getting worse.
- You feel lightheaded, faint or develop a cough not controlled with medications.
- You start coughing up blood.
- You get pain with breathing.
- You get chest pain or pain in your arms, shoulders or belly (*abdomen*).
- You develop an oral temperature above 101ºF (38.3ºC), after not having a temperature for one or more days.
- You are unable to walk up stairs or exercise the way you normally can.
- If any of the symptoms, which brought you into the emergency room before, are getting worse and not better.

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