

# What is Shortness of Breath?

*A Caregiver and Patient Training*



Shortness of breath is often described as an intense tightening in the chest, air hunger, difficulty breathing, breathlessness or a feeling of suffocation.

Sometimes also called dyspnea, breathlessness, or difficulty in breathing, experiencing shortness of breath can be lonely, frightening, and sometimes a scary and overwhelming experience.

By working with your hospice doctor or nurse your shortness of breath can be eased, and you can feel more comfortable.

## Causes of Shortness of Breath

The most common causes are due to a problem in the lungs such as pneumonia, bronchitis, or emphysema. But problems in other organs including the heart, kidneys or liver can also lead to the sensation that it is hard to breathe. Examples of other common problems that can lead to shortness of breath include anxiety, panic attacks, anemia and even constipation.

## How it feels to be Short of Breath

- feel uncomfortably aware of their own breathing
- be an overwhelming symptom that affects everything they try to do
- come on when exerting lots of energy, like when walking up the stairs
- come on when they're not active, like when they're resting or sitting down

## Relieving your Shortness of Breath

- Move slowly and pace your activities within your breathing tolerance. Slight shortness of breath is easier to recover from than extreme shortness of breath from rushing or overexertion.
- Rest before and after an activity (including eating).
- Use relaxation techniques in your daily routine such as visualization, self-hypnosis, and deep slow breathing.
- Be aware of the role anxiety may play in your shortness of breath. Getting ready for an activity that will require effort can make you more short of breath in anticipation. To avoid this, think about your breathing and slow it down to a comfortable level before beginning an activity.
- Take medications prescribed for your shortness of breath before activities that are particularly difficult, e.g., dressing or bathing.
- Plan ahead about what you can do if you become short of breath.
- Use fans to move air in your environment.
- Avoid holding your breath during an activity. When getting out of a chair or bending over to put on your shoes, breathe out as you bend and continue to breathe at your normal pace. Do not hold your breath while climbing the stairs.
- Be aware of your breathing pattern. When first feeling short of breath, slow down your activity, concentrate on your breathing and slow it down. Slow your breath by breathing in through your nose, and out very gently through lips loosely pursed as if you are going to whistle.
- Tell family or friends what helps you manage your breathing. For example, turning a fan on; staying with you but staying quiet; putting their hand gently on your shoulder; reminding you to breathe more slowly.

References:

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