

## Shortness of Breath

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Shortness of breath is a feeling of rapid or uncomfortable breathing, or a feeling of not getting enough air. There are many reasons for this. It is a normal response to vigorous exercise, excitement, or anxiety in some people, or moving from sea level to a high altitude. If you become short of breath after running a short distance or climbing a flight of stairs, this could be a normal reaction by your body, telling you that you need to gradually increase your amount of daily exercise. Shortness of breath on mild exertion, or while sitting or lying still, or during activities that did not make you short of breath before all should be discussed with your health care provider for a thorough investigation. If you find that you *suddenly* become severely short of breath, this is serious and you should seek help immediately!

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### Q . What causes shortness of breath?

A . Being unfit, overweight, smoking, other kinds of air pollution, allergies, heart, lung, or blood disease can all cause shortness of breath. It can be a side effect of some medicines. Blocked nasal passages may also lead to difficult breathing, and while this is unpleasant and should be treated, is not a cause for immediate concern.

### Q . How does heart disease cause shortness of breath?

A . Shortness of breath caused by heart disease is a sign that the heart can no longer pump enough blood to meet the oxygen needs of the muscles and organs of the body, first during exercise, but later even at rest. All kinds of heart disease can be helped by treatment with healthy diet, daily exercise and medications.

### Q . What kind of lung disease can cause shortness of breath?

A . Chronic obstructive lung disease (includes emphysema, chronic bronchitis or asthma) is the most common lung disease causing shortness of breath in older adults. Repeated lung infections can cause shortness of breath by damaging the lungs.

Continuous exposure to any kind of air pollution, fumes, dust or smoking can eventually damage the lungs and produce shortness of breath.

### Q . How can blood disease cause shortness of breath?

A . Our bodies need oxygen carried in the blood to function properly. In some blood diseases, or if there has been bleeding, not enough oxygen reaches the tissues, so shortness of breath on mild exercise can result.

**Q . When should I see my health care provider about shortness of breath?**

**A .**

- If it occurs after mild exercise, while sitting still or lying in bed, or wakes you from sleep at night, or if you cannot breathe easily in bed unless you are propped up with several pillows.
- If it changes and gets worse.
- If it develops suddenly for no obvious reason – this is serious, seek help immediately.
- If dizziness, chest pain, palpitations, ankle swelling, cough, wheezing or fever are present with shortness of breath.

**Q . What will my health care provider do when I go to see him or her?**

**A .** Your provider will take a detailed medical history, perform a physical examination and review all your medicines. He or she will ask some of the following questions about your shortness of breath:

How long have you had this problem?

Did it come on gradually or suddenly?

Is it getting worse? What makes it worse?

Does anything you do help it?

Do you become short of breath while sitting still?

Do you ever wake in the night because of shortness of breath?

How many pillows do you use to sleep comfortably?

Do you wheeze or cough when you are short of breath?

Do you ever get pain, or a feeling of pressure or tightness in your chest?

What other symptoms do you feel?

**Q . Can shortness of breath be cured or treated?**

**A .** All kinds of shortness of breath can be helped, and some can be cured. The cause of the shortness of breath must be found, and treatment started as soon as possible. Smoking, or being around second hand smoke will make it worse. Remember, it is never too late to stop smoking. As soon as you do, your heart, lungs and whole body will start to recover, and your family members and pets will benefit also from not being exposed to second hand smoke.

There are many treatments available to help breathing problems, including a gradually increasing exercise program, weight loss, medicines taken by mouth and inhalers.

**Q . I've been told that shortness of breath is caused by asthma, but I'm 67, and have never suffered from this before?**

**A .** Asthma can develop for the first time at any age, even later in life. If you use the treatments recommended your symptoms should respond well.

**Q . Where can I get more information about shortness of breath?**

**A .**

The American Lung Association  
1-800-LUNG-USA.  
[www.lungusa.org](http://www.lungusa.org)

The American Heart Association  
1-800AHA-USA1.  
[www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

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[www.healthinaging.org](http://www.healthinaging.org)