Shortness of Breath

Shortness of breath, breathlessness, or dyspnea are terms used to describe awareness of difficulty in breathing.

Like pain, it is a sensation that can be felt only by the person experiencing it and its causes are many and varied.

You may be short of breath only with activity, and be comfortable at rest. Or you may be aware of the effort of breathing even at rest. When this is the case, demands you may not think of as work can make your breathing worse: eating and digesting food after eating; dealing with discomfort such as constipation, pain, or a fever; even laughing. Simply anticipating some event can increase the work of breathing.

What can you do to keep your breathing at a comfortable level?

- 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.
Dyspnea

Are there medications to help?

- Medications such as morphine and hydromorphone are often very effective in decreasing the feeling of shortness of breath. These medications are used in the same way as when treating pain. A regular dose is given for constant relief, with “breakthrough” or “rescue” doses for times of when shortness of breath feels worse.

- People who are short of breath often don’t want to use morphine or hydromorphone medications because of worries about addiction or overdosing. These concerns are common, but these medications are very safe. Addiction is rare and side effects can be easily managed.

- If you feel a great deal of anxiety due to shortness of breath, anti-anxiety drugs can be used on a regular or as needed basis. Methotrimeprazine may be useful as a regular anti-anxiety drug. For acute, sudden episodes of shortness of breath, lorazepam may be helpful.

Do you need oxygen?

- Not usually. Oxygen can help decrease shortness of breath for those people whose lungs cannot move enough oxygen into their bloodstream. But, for many people who are short of breath, the lungs do take in enough oxygen. In this case, oxygen may not help. Other strategies such as air blown on the face by fans, medications and other techniques will often be more helpful.

What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?

1. Stop your activity.
2. Get supported in a relaxed position.
3. Concentrate on your breathing, gradually slowing the rate and deepening your breaths. In your mind say “slower breath in, longer breath out” until you feel your breathing responding to your message.
4. If your shortness of breath does not ease to a tolerable level with these strategies, call your physician and discuss adjusting your medication.

Shortness of breath can be a lonely, frightening and overwhelming experience.

To cope with it, you will likely need to use several of the approaches described above.

Shortness of breath is a symptom that can be managed.

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

Patient Teaching Handout
Fraser Health
Approved by: HPC, Clinical Practice Committee • July 17, 2006

Pamphlet adapted from Vancouver Coastal Authority with permission.
**Shortness of Breath**

**What can you do to keep your breathing at a comfortable level?**

- **Relax**. Take slow, deep breaths. Try to return to a state of calm.
- **Breathe in, hold for a few seconds, then exhale slowly**. Repeat as needed.
- **Try using a fan**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try sitting or lying down**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a mouthpiece**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using an oxygen mask**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a humidifier**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.

**What if these things don't help?**

- **Talk to your doctor**. They may be able to prescribe medication or make changes to your treatment plan.
- **Try using a nebulizer**. This can help deliver medication directly to your lungs.
- **Try using a humidifier**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a mouthpiece**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using an oxygen mask**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a humidifier**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.

**If you are experiencing severe shortness of breath**

- **Call 911** immediately. This is a medical emergency.
- **Go to the nearest hospital**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a mouthpiece**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using an oxygen mask**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a humidifier**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
- **Try using a humidifier**. This can help reduce the sensation of shortness of breath.
**Symptom Guidelines**

### Dyspnea

**Are there medications to help?**

- **Medications**
  - **Are there medications to help?**
  - **Are medications available?**
  - **Are medications available in regular or modified form?**
  - **Are medications available in regular or modified form?**

**Do you need oxygen?**

- **Oxygen**
  - **Do you need oxygen?**
  - **Do you need oxygen?**
  - **Do you need oxygen?**

**What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?**

1. **What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?**
2. **What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?**
3. **What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?**
4. **What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?**

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**Appendix B - Punjabi**

**Dyspnea**

Do there medications to help?

- Are there medications to help?
- Are medications available?
- Are medications available in regular or modified form?
- Are medications available in regular or modified form?

Do you need oxygen?

- Do you need oxygen?
- Do you need oxygen?
- Do you need oxygen?

What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?

1. What can you do when your shortness of breath gets worse?
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