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## PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

# Shortness of Breath (Dyspnea)

This information explains how to relieve shortness of breath.

At times, you may have a hard time breathing and feel winded. This is called shortness of breath, or dyspnea. Shortness of breath can be caused by:

- Lung damage from cancer or cancer treatments.
- Blood clots in your lungs (pulmonary embolism).
- Fluid around your heart or lungs.
- Lung infection (pneumonia).
- Asthma or emphysema.
- Heart damage (congestive heart failure).
- Anemia (low number of red blood cells in your body).

Shortness of breath can be temporary or permanent, depending on the cause.

## Relieving Your Shortness of Breath

The best way to relieve shortness of breath is to treat the cause. But, this may not always be possible. Your healthcare provider will work with you to figure out the best ways to improve your breathing. Below are other ways to help relieve the symptoms.

### General tips

- Try using a small, handheld fan to blow air at your face if you start to feel winded. This is an immediate way to relieve shortness of breath.

- In your daily activities, do only as much activity as you can without becoming uncomfortable. If you feel winded, stop and rest until your breathing goes back to how it was when you started. Then, start the activity again, if you can.

## Oxygen

Every cell in your body needs oxygen. If you have too little oxygen in your blood, you may feel short of breath. Your healthcare provider can measure the amount of oxygen in your blood with a small device that's placed on your finger called a pulse oximeter.

If your blood doesn't have enough oxygen, breathing in extra oxygen can help you feel better. You can get extra oxygen in 2 ways:

- With a concentrator. A concentrator is a small machine that takes oxygen from the air and gives it to you through a thin, flexible tube that rests under your nose.
- Through a prefilled, portable oxygen tank. You can take the tank with you wherever you go. Once the tank runs out of oxygen, it can be refilled. A respiratory or home care company can supply oxygen for you at home, if needed.

## Medication

Your healthcare provider may also prescribe medication for your shortness of breath, depending on the cause. You can take these medications by breathing them in, orally (by swallowing them), or intravenously (through a vein).

- If you have asthma, emphysema, or chronic bronchitis, your healthcare provider may prescribe a nebulizer or an inhaler. These are 2 devices that dispense medication as a fine mist that you breathe in. Your nurse will teach you how to use the nebulizer or the inhaler.
- If there's a blood clot in your lung, your healthcare provider may prescribe a medication to thin your blood (an anticoagulant). This medication may be a pill or an injection (shot). Your healthcare provider

will prescribe blood tests and explain the precautions you must take when you're taking these medications.

- If you have pneumonia, your healthcare provider may prescribe antibiotics to treat it.
- If there's too much fluid around your heart or in your lungs, your healthcare provider may prescribe medications such as diuretics (water pills) or diuretic injections to get rid of the fluid.
- Pneumonitis is treatment related inflammation of the lungs. It's another cause of dyspnea and your healthcare provider may prescribe Corticosteroids such as prednisone (Deltasone®) or methylprednisolone (Medrol®)

Other medications that can help improve breathing include:

- Short acting pain medications such as immediate release opioids (morphine sulfate)

Your healthcare provider will talk with you about which of these medications is best for you.

## Breathing Exercises

**Breathing exercises may also help with your dyspnea. For more information, read *Breathing Exercises* ([www.mskcc.org/pe/breathing\\_exercise](http://www.mskcc.org/pe/breathing_exercise)).**

## Other Ways to Improve Breathing

Acupuncture and acupressure can help some people feel less short of breath. Your nurse can refer you to our Integrative Medicine Service for these treatments.

If you're taking medication or using oxygen, keep taking them along with having acupuncture. **Don't stop taking any prescribed medication without speaking to your healthcare provider first.**

# Managing Anxiety

Shortness of breath can be scary. Some people say they start to feel anxious when they're short of breath. But anxiety can cause your breathing to become even more difficult.

Breathing exercises can help you relax. But you may want to learn other ways to help you manage your anxiety. Speak with your healthcare provider about any anxiety you're having. They may be able to prescribe anti-anxiety medications, such as alprazolam (Xanax®) or lorazepam (Ativan®), to help.

Our Integrative Medicine Service also offers relaxation programs that may be helpful for you.

## Call Your Healthcare Provider If You Have:

- Shortness of breath that isn't relieved by:
  - Using extra oxygen
  - Taking breathing medications
  - Doing breathing exercises

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit [www.mskcc.org/pe](http://www.mskcc.org/pe) to search our virtual library.

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