SYMPTOM

Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath is the feeling that breathing is difficult or insufficient.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Breathing feels difficult, tight, fast, or unsatisfying

WHERE IT IS FELT
Chest, throat, or breathing muscles

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Exercise, respiratory infections, anxiety

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New breathlessness at rest or rapidly worsening breathing

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to longer, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It persists, returns, or limits normal activity

Overview

Shortness of breath means feeling unable to get enough air or having to work harder to breathe. The medical term is dyspnea . Some people describe it as breathlessness, air hunger, chest tightness, or being unable to take a satisfying breath.

Breathlessness can be a normal response to hard exercise, high altitude, or extreme temperatures. It can also happen with conditions affecting the lungs, heart, blood, muscles, or nervous system. Stress and panic can change breathing as well.

What matters is how suddenly it began, how severe it is, what triggers it, and whether other symptoms occur. New, unexplained, or worsening breathlessness deserves medical attention.

What it may feel or look like

Shortness of breath is a personal sensation, so people may describe it differently. You might feel that you cannot breathe deeply enough, need to breathe faster, or have to pause while speaking or walking.

Other signs can include:

Breathlessness may start suddenly or develop over weeks or months. It may happen only with activity, when lying flat, or even at rest. These patterns can help identify the cause.

- Tightness or heaviness in the chest
- Noisy breathing, wheezing, or coughing
- Using the neck or shoulder muscles to breathe
- Needing to sit upright to breathe comfortably
- Becoming breathless during activities that were previously manageable
- Waking at night feeling short of breath

Common causes

Common causes include strenuous exercise, reduced physical fitness, respiratory infections, asthma, anxiety, and panic. A blocked nose can also make breathing feel uncomfortable, although it does not usually lower the amount of oxygen reaching the body.

Asthma may cause episodes of wheezing, coughing, or chest tightness. Respiratory infections can cause breathlessness alongside fever, mucus, sore throat, or coughing. Anxiety may lead to rapid breathing, tingling, trembling, or a sense of panic, but new breathlessness should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety.

Long-term lung conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, can gradually make activity more difficult. Heart conditions may cause breathlessness during activity or while lying down, sometimes with ankle swelling.

Less common causes include anemia, which means having too few healthy red blood cells to carry oxygen. Other possibilities include thyroid problems, muscle or nerve disorders, scarring of the lungs, medication effects, and fluid around the lungs.

Urgent causes can include a severe asthma attack, a blood clot in the lung, a collapsed lung, pneumonia, a serious allergic reaction, or a heart problem. These cannot be identified from breathlessness alone and require prompt assessment.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if breathing is severe, began suddenly, or is getting worse quickly. Emergency help is also needed if breathlessness occurs with:

Do not drive yourself if you are severely short of breath.

Seek same-day medical advice for new breathlessness at rest, a clear worsening of an existing breathing problem, or breathlessness with fever, wheezing, or a fast or irregular heartbeat. You should also seek prompt care if you are pregnant, recently had surgery, or have been immobile and develop unexplained breathlessness.

Book a routine appointment if the symptom keeps returning, lasts longer than expected after an illness, or limits walking, stairs, sleep, work, or other usual activities. Gradual breathlessness is still worth discussing, even if it does not feel urgent.

- Chest pain, pressure, or tightness
- Blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin
- Fainting, confusion, extreme drowsiness, or difficulty staying awake
- Inability to speak in full sentences
- Choking or swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat
- Coughing up blood, especially with chest pain or a swollen leg

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the breathlessness started, what triggers it, and whether it changes with activity or body position. They may ask about cough, wheezing, chest discomfort, fever, swelling, recent travel, smoking or vaping, allergies, medicines, and existing health conditions.

An examination may include listening to your heart and lungs, checking your breathing rate and pulse, and measuring oxygen saturation with a small finger sensor.

Depending on the findings, tests may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram to check the heart's electrical activity, or breathing tests. Some people need heart imaging, a scan for a blood clot, or exercise testing. Not everyone needs all of these tests.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. An infection, asthma, anemia, heart condition, and panic symptoms require different approaches. Avoid using another person's inhaler, antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline , or home oxygen.

If you become mildly breathless during exertion, stop and rest in a comfortable upright position. Relaxing your shoulders and breathing out slowly through gently pursed lips may help you regain control. This should not delay urgent help if symptoms are severe or unusual.

If you have a prescribed reliever inhaler or an established action plan, follow the instructions given to you. Seek urgent help if the treatment is not working as expected.

For ongoing breathlessness, appropriate care may include treatment of the underlying condition, gradual supervised activity, pulmonary rehabilitation, stopping smoking, or learning breathing and pacing techniques. A clinician can help decide what is safe for you.

What to expect

Breathlessness from strenuous exercise usually settles with rest. Symptoms caused by a mild respiratory infection often improve as the infection clears, although cough and reduced stamina can last longer.

Other causes may produce recurring or long-term symptoms. Treatment can often reduce breathlessness and improve activity, even when the underlying condition cannot be completely removed.

Keep track of when symptoms happen, what you were doing, how long they lasted, and any related symptoms. This can make a routine appointment more useful. Seek earlier care if your usual pattern changes or everyday activities become harder.

Common questions

Can anxiety cause shortness of breath?

Yes. Anxiety can make breathing faster and shallower, creating a feeling of not getting enough air. However, similar symptoms can have physical causes. New, severe, or persistent breathlessness should be assessed rather than assumed to be anxiety.

Can oxygen levels be normal while I feel breathless?

Yes. Oxygen saturation does not measure how hard you are working to breathe or explain every cause of breathlessness. A normal home reading should not overrule severe symptoms or emergency warning signs.

Why am I short of breath when lying down?

This can happen with heart or lung conditions, reflux, body position, or other causes. Arrange an appointment if it is new, recurring, or makes you need extra pillows. Seek urgent care if it is severe or accompanied by chest pain, fainting, or rapidly worsening breathing.

Is breathlessness just part of getting older?

Breathing may become less efficient with age, but persistent or increasing breathlessness

should not simply be dismissed as ageing. Reduced fitness is one possibility, but heart, lung, and blood conditions may also contribute.

Sources

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