

Shortness of Breath

What is happening

Feeling short of breath is very common in serious illness and can be frightening for both patients and caregivers.

Shortness of breath may have:

- Physical (medical) causes
- Emotional or anxiety-related causes
- Or a combination of both

Even when oxygen levels are normal, patients may still *feel* short of breath.

Common causes

Medical causes

- COPD or lung disease flare-ups
- Fluid buildup from heart failure
- Pneumonia or infection
- Fever
- Anemia

Other contributing causes

- Pain
- Anxiety or panic
- Emotional or spiritual distress
- Oxygen tubing problems
- Room feeling too warm
- Overexertion or lying flat

What you may see

- Rapid or labored breathing
- Anxiety or panic
- Difficulty speaking in full sentences
- Restlessness
- Using neck or chest muscles to breathe
- Increased fatigue or weakness

What you can do first

Check the environment and oxygen

- Make sure oxygen tubing is connected properly
- Check that oxygen is flowing
- Straighten any kinked tubing
- Keep the room cool if possible

Positioning

- Raise the head of the bed
- Help the patient sit upright rather than flat

Air movement

- Blow a fan gently across the face
 - This can be very effective for relieving the sensation of breathlessness

Breathing techniques

- Try slow breathing or pursed-lip breathing if tolerated

Emotional support

- Speak calmly and provide reassurance
- Reduce noise or stimulation if possible
- Music, meditation, prayer, or quiet conversation may help reduce anxiety

Medical treatments

Opioid medications

Opioids are commonly used in hospice care to relieve shortness of breath and improve comfort.

They may:

- Reduce the feeling of air hunger
- Help breathing feel easier
- Work relatively quickly

Liquid forms may work faster than pills.

Anxiety medications

If anxiety is contributing to symptoms, medications such as lorazepam (Ativan) may help.

Inhalers

Inhalers may also help if:

- Wheezing is present
- The patient has previously used inhalers for breathing problems

When to call hospice

- Shortness of breath is worsening despite treatment
- Oxygen equipment is not working properly
- Medications are running low
- Coughing becomes severe or difficult to control
- The patient appears very distressed or frightened
- You are unsure what to do next