

OUT OF BREATH?

By Moira Fordyce, MD

Shortness of breath is 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 should all be discussed with your health care provider for thorough investigation. If you find that you suddenly become severely short of breath, this is serious and you must seek help immediately.

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.

Q: What kind of lung disease can cause shortness of breath?

A: Chronic obstructive lung disease (includes emphysema, chronic



bronchitis and asthma) is the commonest lung disease causing shortness of breath in older adults. Repeated lung infections can cause shortness of breath by damaging the lungs.

Q: How can blood disease cause shortness of breath?

A: Our body needs 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 exertion can result.

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

- If it occurs after mild exercise while sitting still or lying in bed or wakens you from sleep at night or if you cannot breathe easily in bed unless you are propped up with several pillows
- 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 the shortness of breath

Q: What will my health care provider do when I visit?

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?
- Do you become short of breath while sitting still?

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 must be found and treatment started as soon as possible. Smoking or being around second hand smoke will make it worse.

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

Q: I've been told that shortness of breath can be 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 recommended treatments, 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.lung.org
The American Heart Association; 1-800-AHA-USA; www.heart.org

Got a question for Dr. Moira Fordyce? Email: moiraf9@gmail.com