

Shortness of breath

Shortness of breath is a common symptom. It may be related to serious diseases, or it could be a result of being out of shape physically. Your health care provider should assess whether your shortness of breath is treatable with lifestyle changes, such as quitting smoking or losing weight.

Serious conditions associated with shortness of breath include:

- Asthma
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Heart disease (heart attack, heart failure)
- Anaemia
- Low blood pressure
- Anxiety disorder
- Pneumonia
- Tuberculosis
- COVID-19
- Blood clots in the lungs, also called pulmonary embolism

In a healthy person, shortness of breath can be caused by:

- Very strenuous exercise
- Extreme temperatures
- Bad air quality
- Obesity
- High altitude
- Choking
- Carbon monoxide poisoning
- Allergic reaction (for example, following a bee sting)

Symptoms

- Swelling in your feet and ankles
- Trouble breathing when you lie flat
- High fever, chills, and cough
- Lips or fingertips turning blue
- Wheezing, a whistling-type sound when you breathe in or out
- A high-pitched noise when you breathe
- Worsening shortness of breath after using an inhaler
- Breathlessness that doesn't get better after 30 minutes of rest

Risk factors

- Muscle weakness
- Low haemoglobin
- Being out of shape from lack of exercise or illness

Serious risk factors include:

- Severe obesity
- Continued exposure to asthma triggers, such as cat dander or ragweed
- Smoking
- Prior lung diseases

When to see a health care provider

Visit your health care provider when a normal activity causes unexpected shortness of breath. Get your breathing difficulty checked if it:

- Comes on suddenly
- Is persistent
- Interferes with your daily activities

Treating shortness of breath

Treatment for shortness of breath depends on its cause. If the cause is your lungs or airways, your health care provider may give you medication. If it's because of anaemia, you may need iron supplements. Most people begin to feel better after the diagnosis is clear. Your provider may recommend that you:

- Avoid asthma triggers
- Stop smoking
- Use oxygen

Prevention

- Pacing yourself
- Trying not to hold your breath
- Sitting in front of a fan so that it blows on your face
- Losing weight if you are overweight
- Avoiding strenuous activity at elevations above 1 500 m, unless you have trained in a high-altitude environment
- Avoiding asthma triggers
- Avoiding exposure to pollutants in the air, both indoors and outdoors
- Quitting smoking, even if you have smoked for a long time
- Getting a routine health check-up
- Continuing medications as prescribed
- Ensuring that your oxygen supply is adequate and your equipment works properly, if you rely on supplemental oxygen

Self-assessment tool

Grade

- 0 'I only get breathless with strenuous exercise.'
- 1 'I get short of breath when hurrying on the level or walking up a slight hill.'
- 2 'I walk slower than people of the same age on the level because of breathlessness or have to stop for breath when walking at my own pace on the level.'
- 3 'I stop for breath after walking about 100 m or after a few minutes on the level.'
- 4 'I am too breathless to leave the house' or 'I am breathless when dressing.'

NB: Scale 1–4, seek medical help

Reference:

Chest Foundation. nd. Chest Foundation [Online] Available from: <https://foundation.chestnet.org/> [accessed on 14 May 2020].

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