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How to Manage Your

# Shortness of Breath



## This patient guide will help you understand:

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This guide is for people who have shortness of breath before, during or after cancer treatment. It can be used by patients, family, friends or caregivers. It does not replace advice from your health care team.

# What is shortness of breath?

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Shortness of breath is the feeling of not having enough air to breathe.

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It can also be an uncomfortable feeling while you are breathing.

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You can have shortness of breath when resting or when you are doing something physical, no matter how small the activity.

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**Feeling short of breath** can be scary and can affect your normal day to day activities.

## People with shortness of breath often say they feel:

Anxious

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Frightened

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Nervous

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Panicky

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Very breathless

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### What happens during Shortness of Breath?

Your breathing gets shallower and faster and you may feel like you do not get as much oxygen from your breaths.

Your muscles then begin to tense and you start to feel nervous to do things.

The fear of not being able to breathe makes your shortness of breath worse.

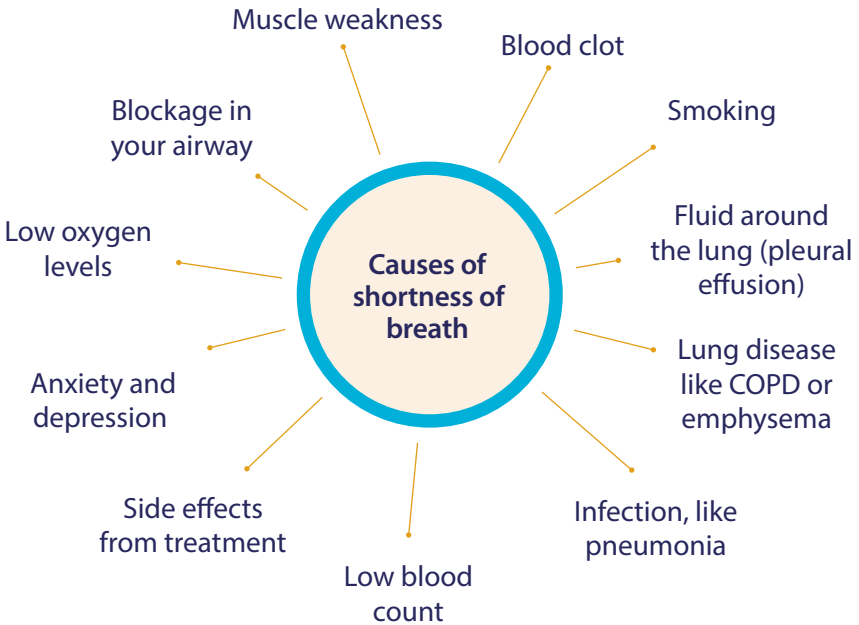


# What causes shortness of breath?

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It is important to find the treatable causes that may be making your shortness of breath worse.

**This picture shows things that can cause shortness of breath:**



# What can I do to manage my shortness of breath?

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## Learn breathing exercises and positions

Breathing exercises can be helpful, especially if you have severe shortness of breath.

### Abdominal breathing

This type of breathing can help you recover from feeling breathless after an activity.

#### Follow these steps:

1. Relax your shoulders.
2. Place one hand on your abdomen (belly) just below your chest.
3. Count 1, 2, 3, 4, as you take a breath in and feel your abdomen rise slowly.
4. Breathe out slowly with pursed lips (like you are whistling or blowing out a candle) as you count 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10.
5. Repeat this 3 – 4 times.

Practice this 3 times a day and before and after doing an activity.

### Recovery breathing

Use this exercise any time you feel very breathless or panicky.

#### Follow these steps:

1. Use one of the positions from page 6.
2. Drop your chin.
3. Breathe in and out while focusing on your breath.
4. Purse your lips.
5. Little by little, blow out for longer periods.
6. Once your breathing slows down, sit up straight and do 2 or 3 more abdominal breaths.
7. Rest for a few minutes before starting your activities again.

#### Tip:

You can practice recovery breathing while sitting, standing, or lying down.

## Positions to help you breathe easier and relax

**Standing:** Lean against a wall, with your chin slightly dropped towards your chest. Your shoulders should be relaxed and your arms hanging loosely by your sides.

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**Sitting:** Sit and lean forward. Rest your forearms on your thighs with your wrists relaxed and your feet on the floor.

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**Laying down:** Make a slope with a foam wedge in between your box-spring and mattress or with three or four pillows stacked up. Lay down on your side with pillows supporting you so that your head is higher than your legs.

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## Do relaxation exercises

Relaxing can help you to slow your breathing and make your breaths more effective.

### Follow these steps:

1. Find a comfortable position.
2. Relax or close your eyes.
3. Now breathe gently.
4. Try to think of something pleasant and create a picture in your mind.
5. You may like to listen to music to help you relax.

Videos on breathing and relaxation can be found at:  
[www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB](https://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB)



## Make lifestyle changes



### Take your medications as prescribed

There are some medications that can help shortness of breath.

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You may need oxygen if your oxygen level is low. Your health care team will test your levels if you are having shortness of breath.

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### Pace yourself

Break your activities down into smaller steps.

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Plan your activities so that you have time to do them slowly and comfortably.

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Keep things that you use often close by and within easy reach.

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### Do things in ways that use less energy

Sit down when doing chores and getting dressed.

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Rest as much as you need to.

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Avoid heavy lifting. Carry things at your waist or hold them close to your chest. Use a backpack to carry things and only fill bags half-way.

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Keep your phone close by and stop to catch your breath when you are having a conversation.

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A standing or sitting position may be more comfortable during sexual activity with your partner.

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### Share your feelings

Shortness of breath can make you feel worried and anxious. Share your feelings with family, friends and your health care team.

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### **Be active**

Even if you have severe lung problems, you can do small amounts of exercise.

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Take it slowly and use abdominal breathing as much as possible.

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Increase the amount of exercise you do little by little to improve your breathing and feel better.

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### **Showering or bathing**

Keep the bath water shallow and lukewarm.

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Open a window in the bathroom to let in fresh air and let out steam.

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Sit in the shower.

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Position the shower water away from your face.

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Rest when you need to.

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### **Use abdominal breathing when walking up slopes, climbing stairs or standing up.**

#### **To climb stairs:**

Stand close to the stairs with one hand on the railing beside you.

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Breathe in as you lift your leg up.

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Breathe out as you place your leg on the step and raise yourself up.

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### **Change the way you eat**

Chew your food slowly, taking breaks in between bites.

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Try smaller meals more often.

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If you are having trouble eating, ask your health care team about trying nutrition drinks.

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## Use devices to help you save your energy



Some devices can help to cut down on the work your body needs to do in order to breathe.

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Use pillows to raise your head when lying down.

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Use a reclining chair with a footrest when sitting.

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Use a walker or wheelchair if you need them.

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Ask about using a bedrail, bath board, or other safety equipment.

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Try using a cool fan across your face to breathe easier.

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## Change your environment



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Avoid things that can cause shortness of breath like smoking, perfume, flowers and pets.

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Open a window or use a fan to get fresh air if the weather is good.

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Stay inside when the weather is very hot or cold.

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## Quit smoking

Smoking can make your shortness of breath worse.



### Your pharmacist or family doctor can help you make a plan to quit smoking. They can:

Suggest nicotine replacements  
(like the patch or gum)

Help you keep track of your  
progress

Prescribe medication to help  
you quit

### Quitting smoking is the best decision you can make, but quitting is hard. Here are some resources to help you:

- Smokers Helpline, Canadian Cancer Society  
[www.smokershelpline.ca](http://www.smokershelpline.ca)
- Quit Smoking  
<http://www.quitsmoking.com>

# When should I talk to my health care team?

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## **Tell your health care team right away if you have any of these symptoms:**

Breathing that has become harder over a short period of time.

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You are struggling to breathe and feel very nervous.

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A sharp pain when you cough or take a deep breath.

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A fever of 38.3°C (100.9°F) or higher at any time **or** 38.0°C (100.4°F) or higher for at least one hour.

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A new cough or one that is getting worse.

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Noisy breathing.

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## **Call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department if you ever have:**

Breathing problems with dizziness, an increased heart rate or very pale skin.

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A sudden, new or increasing chest pain.

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Sudden shortness of breath when you wake up.

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## **What is symptom screening?**

In Ontario, patients with cancer fill out a symptom screening tool. The screen tells your health care team about your symptoms and how you are feeling. The tool is called the Edmonton Symptom Assessment System (ESAS).

Doing your symptom screening helps you and your health care team to manage your symptoms.

Use the boxes below to help your health care team understand your symptom.



0 is no shortness of breath and 10 is the worst shortness of breath.

**0-3**

You may have **Mild** shortness of breath if:

You can usually sit and lie quietly

It comes and goes

It gets worse with activity

You have no anxiety or mild anxiety while feeling short of breath

It is not hard to breathe

**4-6**

You may have **Moderate** shortness of breath if:

You feel it almost all the time

You have new or worsening shortness of breath

Your shortness of breath gets worse with activity and only settles a little bit with rest

It is somewhat hard to breathe

**7-10**

You may have **Severe** shortness of breath if:

It comes on quickly or has gotten much worse

You almost always feel anxious

Breathing is always hard

You wake up suddenly feeling short of breath

Your shortness of breath makes it hard for you to talk or have a conversation

Your health care team wants to know about your shortness of breath. Your questions and concerns are important. Do not be afraid to share them.

# Where can I get more information?

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For links to these and other helpful resources go to:  
[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

## Websites:

### **Cancer Care Ontario**

[www.cancercare.on.ca](http://www.cancercare.on.ca)

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

[www.cancer.ca](http://www.cancer.ca)

1-888-939-3333

## Support services:

### **Canadian Cancer Society**

#### **Peer Support Service**

[www.cancer.ca/support](http://www.cancer.ca/support)

### **Cancer Chat Canada**

[www.cancerchatcanada.ca](http://www.cancerchatcanada.ca)

## Videos:

### **Managing Shortness of Breath, a series of videos**

[www.youtube.com/user/](http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB)

ManagingSOB



The recommendations in this guide are based on published evidence and expert consensus. The information in this guide was adapted from the following patient tools:

- Managing your Breathing  
(Trillium Health Partners)
- Getting the Air You Need  
(Juravinski Cancer Centre)

This patient guide was created by Cancer Care Ontario to provide patients with information about shortness of breath. It should be used for information only and does not replace medical advice. This guide does not include all information available about managing shortness of breath. Always ask your health care team if you have questions or concerns. The information in this guide does not create a physician-patient relationship between Cancer Care Ontario and you.

**Need this information in an accessible format?**

1-855-460-2647 | TTY 416-217-1815 | [publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca](mailto:publicaffairs@cancercare.on.ca)

For other patient guides please go to:

[www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms](http://www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms)

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<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/patientguidefeedback>

Version 1 – 2016

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