



Breathing

Online version with active resource links at: <http://cancer-help.me/breathing>

NOTE: If you are having any issues breathing, immediately contact your healthcare team.

Dyspnea is the medical term for a feeling of breathlessness. People with earlier-stage cancers who have other conditions that affect the heart or lungs may experience dyspnea. Many people with advanced cancer may experience this symptom. It is important to tell your doctor right away about sudden shortness of breath or worsening symptoms.

Common symptoms of dyspnea:

- Uncomfortable breathing
- Shortness of breath
- Inability to get enough air
- A feeling of smothering, tightness, drowning, or suffocation

A person may experience dyspnea even though the actual levels of oxygen are within normal range. To learn more about your symptoms, your doctor will review your medical history. They will ask you to describe your symptoms and what makes the symptoms worse. He or she may also ask you to rate your symptoms on a scale of intensity.

Causes of shortness of breath

Dyspnea may be caused by a tumor or another condition related to cancer but many of these causes are treatable. Some common causes of dyspnea include:

- Narrowed or blocked airway, such as by a tumor or mucous plug
- Sudden narrowing of the airway, such as a bronchospasm
- Shortage of oxygen in blood, called hypoxemia
- Fluid between the lung and the chest wall
- Pneumonia

Treating shortness of breath

An important step in managing dyspnea is discovering and treating the actual cause, such as a tumor or blood clot. Once the cause of dyspnea is determined, the doctor may also recommend some the following to help relieve dyspnea symptoms:

- Receiving extra oxygen
- Sitting in front of a household fan
- Breathing cooler air by lowering the temperature in a room
- Breathing cleaner air: open or close windows, use a humidifier, get rid of smoke & pet dander
- Getting a sense of open space by seeing a view of the outside or being in an empty room
- Keeping your head/chest raised, use pillows to lift your head to nearly sitting or using a recliner
- Practicing techniques that take your focus away from the problem, such as relaxation techniques and meditation
- Taking medications that act on the central nervous system to relax the sensation of breathlessness, such as morphine or other opioid medications
- Taking anti-anxiety drugs to manage the anxiety causing or caused by the dyspnea

Content adapted from websites below.

Resources for Additional Information:

- [Cancer.Net, Shortness of Breath or Dyspnea](#)
- [American Cancer Society, Shortness of breath](#)
- [Cancer.Net, Long-Term Side Effects of Cancer Treatment](#)
- [Chemocare, Dyspnea \(Shortness of Breath\)](#)
- [NIH, Home Oxygen Safety](#)

Recursos en Español:

- [Cancer.Net, Dificultad para respirar o disnea](#)
- [Chemocare, Problemas pulmonares y otros problemas respiratorios](#)