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ATS Patient Health Series
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Shortness of Breath

What is shortness of breath?

Shortness of breath or breathlessness is the feeling of having difficulty breathing. Your health care provider may use the word dyspnea, to describe your trouble breathing. Only you can tell how hard it is for you to breathe. For this reason, it is common for your health care provider to ask you to rate your shortness of breath on a scale of “0” to “10” (0=no shortness of breath and 10=very severe shortness of breath). **Being short of breath, no matter how bad, does not hurt your lungs.** Try not to be afraid, there are things you can do that can help your breathing.

Why do I get short of breath?

Shortness of breath can happen from just being out of shape or overweight. Lung and heart conditions are the most common health reasons. If you are having trouble breathing and have not discussed this with your health care provider, do so.

Can I prevent my shortness of breath?

Shortness of breath from a health reason may be prevented by taking medicine. If it is because you are out of shape, an exercise program is what you need. Many times, you do less activity because you do not like being short of breath. This leads to being even more out of shape and more short of breath. If it is because you have a lung condition, ask your health care provider about Pulmonary Rehabilitation. This is a program of exercise and education that teaches you how to control your breathing.

How can I control my shortness of breath?

No “one” thing works for everyone. Try practicing these things:

- Take your time. Rushing can increase your shortness of breath.
- Try not to hold your breath during activities. This can make your breathing worse.
- Use a shopping cart or four-wheeled walker to support your arms when walking or shopping.
- Use pursed lip breathing when doing things that make you short of breath. Do this by slowly breathing out your mouth with your lips in the whistling or kissing position. NEVER force all of the air out of your lungs.

- Sitting in front of a fan that blows on your face may make you breathe easier.
- Try to stay relaxed. Tension can make your shortness of breath worse.
- If you use an inhaler, ask if you should use it before activities.

Would medication help?

If you have a lung condition, your health care provider may prescribe a short acting bronchodilator. If you are short of breath from being out of shape, only exercise can help. If you have a very severe breathing problem (lung cancer or very severe COPD), some medicines may be prescribed that might be helpful.

Would oxygen help?

Oxygen is often not the “right” treatment for shortness of breath. Oxygen is given when your blood oxygen level is low. You can be short of breath even if your oxygen level is normal. The only way to know if oxygen is right for you is to have your oxygen levels checked.

When should I call my health care provider because of my shortness of breath?

Call if the following happens

- Shortness of breath is new for you, even with simple activities
- Your shortness of breath with activities no longer goes away when you rest
- You suddenly get short of breath for no reason

Words to search for on the internet:

breathlessness, shortness of breath, dyspnea, air hunger, pursed lip breathing