SYMPTOM

Breathing difficulty

Breathing difficulty is the feeling that you cannot get enough air or breathe comfortably.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
You cannot get enough air or breathing takes extra effort

WHERE IT IS FELT
Chest, throat, or upper body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Colds and chest infections, asthma, low fitness

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New breathlessness at rest or with much less activity

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to months, depending on the cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It recurs, persists, or limits normal activity

Overview

Breathing difficulty means feeling short of breath, unable to take a satisfying breath, or as though breathing needs more effort than usual. The medical term is dyspnea .

Breathlessness can occur during hard exercise, at high altitude, or after inactivity. It can also be linked to a lung condition, heart problem, infection, anemia, anxiety, or another cause.

A useful clue is whether you are more breathless than usual during an activity you normally manage comfortably. Sudden or severe breathing difficulty can be an emergency. Mild breathlessness that keeps returning also deserves attention.

What it may feel or look like

Breathing difficulty can feel like:

Other signs include wheezing, coughing, noisy breathing, flared nostrils, or using the neck and shoulder muscles to breathe. You may be more comfortable sitting upright than lying flat.

Breathing difficulty can cause panic, and anxiety may worsen it. However, do not automatically assume anxiety is the cause.

- Tightness, heaviness, or discomfort in the chest
- Air hunger, as though you cannot get enough air
- Needing to breathe faster or more deeply
- Trouble taking a full breath
- Needing to pause while walking, climbing stairs, or speaking

Common causes

Respiratory infections, including colds, influenza, COVID-19, and bronchitis, may cause breathlessness with coughing, fever, tiredness, congestion, or a sore throat.

Asthma can cause episodes of wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and breathlessness. Triggers may include exercise, allergens, cold air, smoke, or infections.

Low physical fitness can cause breathlessness with activity, especially after illness or reduced movement. Higher body weight can also increase the effort required for breathing and activity.

Long-term lung conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, may gradually make everyday activities harder. Smoking and exposure to dust, fumes, or air pollution can contribute.

Heart conditions may cause breathlessness during activity or while lying down, sometimes with fluid collecting in the lungs or legs.

Other causes include anemia, lung scarring or inflammation, problems with the muscles or nerves used for breathing, and pulmonary hypertension.

Sudden causes needing urgent assessment include a blood clot in the lung, collapsed lung, severe asthma attack, serious allergic reaction, pneumonia, or heart attack. Breathlessness alone cannot identify the cause.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if breathing difficulty is severe, starts suddenly, or prevents you from speaking in full sentences. Do the same if it occurs with:

Do not drive yourself if you are severely short of breath.

Seek same-day medical care for new breathlessness at rest, a clear worsening of an existing breathing problem, or breathlessness with fever, wheezing, or chest discomfort. Sudden breathlessness with one swollen or painful leg also needs urgent assessment, particularly after

surgery, prolonged immobility, pregnancy, or recent childbirth.

Book a routine appointment if breathlessness keeps returning, lasts longer than expected after an infection, wakes you at night, or limits usual activities. Swollen ankles, an ongoing cough, unexplained tiredness, or needing extra pillows to breathe comfortably also require review.

- Blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin
- Chest pressure or pain, especially if it spreads to an arm, back, neck, or jaw
- Fainting, marked confusion, or extreme drowsiness
- Swelling of the lips or tongue, hives, or trouble swallowing
- Coughing up more than small streaks of blood

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the problem began, what triggers it, how quickly it developed, and whether you have cough, fever, wheezing, pain, palpitations, or leg swelling. They may also ask about smoking, travel, medications, allergies, work exposures, and existing conditions.

They will usually check your breathing rate, heart rate, temperature, and blood oxygen level and listen to your heart and lungs.

Tests may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram, or breathing tests. Some people need a heart ultrasound, lung scan, or exercise-based testing.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and may include treatment for infection, inhaled medicine for narrowed airways, management of anemia, or care for a heart or lung condition. Oxygen helps in specific situations but is not a general treatment for breathlessness.

If symptoms are mild, stop the activity and sit upright with support. Relax your shoulders and breathe slowly and steadily. Gently breathing out through pursed lips, as though cooling hot food, may help.

Use a prescribed reliever inhaler like albuterol or ipratropium according to your personal treatment plan. Do not borrow another person's inhaler or delay urgent help while repeatedly trying home treatments.

Avoid smoke, vaping aerosols, strong fumes, and known triggers. Once serious causes are ruled out, gradual activity or supervised rehabilitation may help with reduced fitness or a long-term heart or lung condition.

A home pulse oximeter measures blood oxygen, but cold hands, movement, nail products, skin pigmentation, and device quality can affect readings. Do not rely on it alone to decide whether severe symptoms are safe.

What to expect

Breathlessness from exertion may settle within minutes of rest. Symptoms from a respiratory infection often improve as it clears. Asthma and other long-term conditions may cause recurring or persistent symptoms that improve with an appropriate management plan.

Track triggers, duration, associated symptoms, and the activities you can manage. A change from your usual pattern is often more informative than a single measurement.

Common questions

Can anxiety cause breathing difficulty?

Yes. Anxiety can cause rapid breathing, chest tightness, tingling, or difficulty taking a complete breath. However, new or unusual breathlessness should not be attributed to anxiety without considering physical causes.

Should I breathe into a paper bag?

No. Paper-bag breathing can reduce oxygen intake and may be dangerous if the breathlessness has a physical cause.

Is breathlessness after exercise normal?

Temporary breathlessness during strenuous activity can be normal. Arrange an assessment if it is new, out of proportion to the activity, slow to settle, or accompanied by chest pain, faintness, or wheezing.

Can breathlessness occur without low oxygen?

Yes. Breathing effort, airway narrowing, heart function, fitness, and the brain's response all influence the sensation. A normal oxygen reading does not explain the cause or rule out every serious problem.

Sources

- NHS. Shortness of breath
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia. Breathing difficulties - first aid
- American Thoracic Society. Shortness of Breath
- Parshall MB, Schwartzstein RM, Adams L, et al. "An Official American Thoracic Society Statement: Update on the Mechanisms, Assessment, and Management of Dyspnea." American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine . 2012;185(4):435-452
- Berliner D, Schneider N, Welte T, Bauersachs J. "The Differential Diagnosis of Dyspnea." Deutsches Ärzteblatt International . 2016;113:834-845