SYMPTOM

Breathing problems

Breathing problems are feelings of difficult, uncomfortable, or unusually rapid breathing.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Unable to get enough air or breathe comfortably

WHERE IT IS FELT
Chest, throat, or whole body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Respiratory infections, asthma, low physical fitness

WHEN IT IS URGENT
New breathlessness at rest or clear worsening today

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to months, depending on the underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Symptoms recur or limit your usual activities

Overview

Breathing problems can mean feeling short of breath, unable to take a full breath, or more aware of breathing than usual. The medical term is breathlessness or dyspnea .

Breathlessness is a symptom, not a diagnosis. It can happen after hard exercise or during a respiratory infection. It can also be linked to conditions affecting the lungs, heart, blood, muscles, or nervous system. Stress and panic can change breathing as well.

The timing matters. A problem that begins suddenly has different possible causes from breathlessness that develops over weeks or months. How severe it feels does not always show how serious the cause is.

What it may feel or look like

You may describe breathing problems as:

Other symptoms can provide useful clues. These include coughing, wheezing, fever, a racing heartbeat, swollen ankles, dizziness, or unusual tiredness.

Wheezing is a high-pitched sound, usually while breathing out. A harsh sound while breathing in

is called stridor and may indicate narrowing in the upper airway. Stridor with difficult breathing needs urgent assessment.

- Not getting enough air
- Tightness, pressure, or heaviness in the chest
- Needing more effort to breathe
- Breathing faster or more deeply than usual
- Needing to pause when talking or walking
- Feeling worse when lying flat
- Waking at night feeling short of breath

Common causes

Common causes include respiratory infections, asthma, reduced physical fitness, and breathing in smoke or other irritants. A blocked nose can also make breathing feel uncomfortable, even when the lungs are working normally.

Asthma can cause episodes of wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, and breathlessness. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, can cause ongoing breathlessness, especially in people with a history of smoking or long-term exposure to lung irritants.

Stress, panic, and anxiety can lead to rapid or deep breathing. These symptoms are real, but new breathlessness should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety.

Less common causes include anemia, which means not having enough healthy red blood cells, and conditions affecting breathing muscles or nerves. Heart conditions can cause breathlessness during activity, when lying down, or alongside ankle swelling. Some medicines can also affect breathing.

Urgent causes include a severe asthma attack, a blood clot in the lung, a collapsed lung, a serious allergic reaction, or a heart problem. These are not the most likely explanations for every episode, but they need prompt care when warning signs are present.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if you have:

Move into fresh air and call emergency services if several people in the same building develop headache, dizziness, nausea, or breathlessness. This may suggest carbon monoxide exposure.

Do not re-enter the building until it has been declared safe.

Seek same-day medical advice for new breathlessness at rest, a clear worsening of an existing breathing problem, or symptoms that are not responding to your prescribed treatment. Fever with increasing breathlessness also needs prompt assessment.

Book a routine appointment if breathlessness keeps returning, lasts longer than expected after an illness, wakes you at night, or limits walking and other usual activities.

- Severe or rapidly worsening difficulty breathing
- Trouble speaking more than a few words
- Blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin
- Chest pressure, fainting, confusion, or marked drowsiness
- Sudden breathlessness with coughing up blood
- Swelling of the lips or tongue, hives, or throat tightness
- Breathlessness after choking or a serious injury

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the problem started, whether it was sudden, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about cough, fever, chest discomfort, allergies, smoking, recent travel, medicines, and exposure to dust, fumes, or infections.

They may check your breathing rate, heart rate, temperature, lungs, heart, and oxygen level. A fingertip oxygen monitor can be helpful, but its reading does not replace an examination and may be affected by cold hands, movement, nail products, or skin pigmentation.

Depending on your symptoms, tests may include blood tests, a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram to check the heart's electrical activity, or breathing tests such as spirometry. Spirometry measures how much air you can breathe out and how quickly.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. It may include inhaled medicines for asthma or COPD, treatment for a heart condition, iron treatment for some types of anemia, or care for an infection. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline do not treat viral infections and are not needed for every cough or breathing problem.

While arranging care, stop what you are doing and sit upright in a supported position. Relax

tight clothing and try slow, steady breaths. Some people find breathing out gently through pursed lips helpful. A cool fan directed toward the face may reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

Use prescribed inhalers according to your personal treatment plan. Do not use another person's inhaler or start oxygen without medical advice.

Avoid smoke, vaping aerosols, strong fumes, and known triggers. Once a serious cause has been excluded, gradually rebuilding activity may help if low fitness contributes to the problem.

What to expect

Breathlessness from exertion may settle within minutes of resting. Symptoms from a respiratory infection can improve over days but may take longer to disappear fully. Asthma and other long-term conditions can cause recurring symptoms that improve with suitable treatment and monitoring.

Keep track of when symptoms happen, what you were doing, and whether there were other symptoms. Arrange follow-up if the pattern changes, treatment becomes less effective, or normal activities become harder.

Common questions

Can a normal oxygen reading rule out a serious problem?

No. An oxygen reading is only one piece of information. Some serious conditions can cause breathlessness before the oxygen level falls.

Can anxiety cause breathing problems?

Yes. Anxiety can cause rapid breathing, chest tightness, tingling, and a feeling of not getting enough air. New, severe, or unexplained symptoms still need appropriate medical assessment.

Why am I breathless only when walking or climbing stairs?

Exercise makes the heart and lungs work harder. Low fitness is one possible explanation, but asthma, anemia, heart disease, lung disease, and other conditions can produce the same pattern.

Should I breathe into a paper bag?

No. This can lower oxygen levels and may be dangerous if the cause is not anxiety. Use slow, controlled breathing instead and seek help if symptoms do not settle.

Sources

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