SYMPTOM

# Rapid shallow breathing

Rapid shallow breathing means taking faster breaths that do not feel very deep.

**WHAT IT FEELS LIKE**
Breathing faster than usual without satisfying deep breaths

**WHERE IT IS FELT**
Chest, sometimes with effort in the neck or belly

**MOST COMMON CAUSES**
Exercise, anxiety, fever

**WHEN IT IS URGENT**
New rapid breathing at rest or worsening breathlessness

**USUALLY LASTS**
Minutes after exertion; otherwise linked to the underlying cause

**SEE A DOCTOR IF**
Episodes recur, lack a clear trigger, or limit activity

## Overview

Rapid shallow breathing means taking more breaths than usual while each breath feels or appears small. The medical term is tachypnea , although healthcare professionals may define this differently depending on your age and situation.

Breathing naturally becomes faster during exercise. It can also speed up with anxiety, pain, fever, or illness. It should usually slow as you rest and the trigger settles.

Rapid shallow breathing is a symptom, not a disease. It can have many causes, ranging from temporary stress to a problem affecting the lungs, heart, blood, or body chemistry. The breathing pattern alone cannot identify the cause.

## What it may feel or look like

You may notice quick chest movements or feel unable to take a satisfying deep breath. Breathing may require more concentration or effort than usual.

Other possible features include:

Some people do not feel very breathless even though others can see that they are breathing

quickly. Babies and young children may show nostril flaring, grunting, poor feeding, unusual sleepiness, or skin pulling inward between the ribs.

- Tightness or discomfort in the chest
- Movement of the shoulders, neck, or belly with each breath
- Tingling around the mouth or in the hands during anxiety-related overbreathing
- Cough, wheezing, fever, pain, or a racing heartbeat
- Difficulty talking, walking, feeding, or sleeping because of breathing

## Common causes

Exercise and physical effort commonly increase the breathing rate because working muscles need more oxygen. Breathing should gradually return toward normal during rest.

Anxiety, panic, or strong emotion can lead to fast breathing. Overbreathing may lower the amount of carbon dioxide in the blood, causing light-headedness, tingling, or muscle tightness. These symptoms can feel frightening, but similar symptoms can also have physical causes.

Fever, pain, and dehydration can make the body work harder and speed up breathing. Vomiting or diarrhoea may contribute by causing fluid loss.

Respiratory infections can cause rapid breathing, often with a cough, blocked nose, fever, or tiredness. These include common viral infections as well as pneumonia, which is an infection deeper in the lungs.

Asthma or other ongoing lung conditions may cause rapid breathing with wheezing, coughing, chest tightness, or reduced ability to exercise.

Less common causes include anaemia, when the blood carries less oxygen than usual; heart problems that allow fluid to collect in the lungs; and metabolic problems that disturb the body's normal acid balance.

Some urgent conditions can also cause rapid breathing. These include a severe asthma attack, a serious infection, a blood clot in the lung, a collapsed lung, a severe allergic reaction, or poisoning. These causes usually produce other concerning symptoms and need prompt assessment.

## When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if rapid breathing comes with:

Seek urgent same-day medical care for new rapid breathing at rest, breathing that is getting worse, or breathlessness with fever and significant illness. Prompt assessment is also important for coughing up blood, one-sided leg swelling, new wheezing, or signs of dehydration such as very little urine.

Babies and young children should be assessed urgently if breathing is persistently fast or laboured, especially with poor feeding, grunting, ribs pulling inward, unusual sleepiness, or a change in colour.

Book a routine appointment if episodes keep returning, have no clear trigger, disturb sleep, or reduce your usual activity. Mention any cough, wheezing, weight change, heavy menstrual bleeding, or symptoms that occur when lying flat.

- Severe difficulty breathing or inability to speak in full sentences
- Blue, grey, or unusually pale lips, tongue, or skin
- New confusion, fainting, extreme drowsiness, or difficulty waking
- Sudden chest pain, especially with sweating, nausea, or faintness
- Choking or swelling of the lips, tongue, face, or throat
- A suspected overdose, poisoning, or serious chest injury

## How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the breathing began, whether it started suddenly, and what you were doing at the time. They may ask about fever, pain, anxiety, cough, wheezing, chest discomfort, medicines, recent travel, pregnancy, and existing heart or lung conditions.

They will usually count your breaths while you are resting. Normal breathing rates differ by age, and a single reading can be affected by activity, distress, or fever.

The examination may include listening to your lungs and heart and checking your temperature, pulse, blood pressure, and blood oxygen level. A normal reading on a home oxygen monitor does not explain the cause or rule out every serious problem.

Depending on your symptoms, tests might include blood tests, a chest X-ray, an electrocardiogram to check the heart's electrical activity, or breathing tests. Not everyone needs testing.

## Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the breathing change. An infection, asthma flare, anaemia, heart problem, or metabolic disturbance requires a different approach, so treatment should not be based on breathing rate alone.

If symptoms began after exercise, stop and rest in a comfortable position. Loosen tight clothing and move away from smoke, fumes, or heat. Sip fluids if you may be mildly dehydrated and can swallow normally.

If anxiety may be contributing and there are no emergency signs, try relaxing your shoulders and slowing the exhalation. Breathe gently rather than forcing repeated deep breaths. Do not breathe into a paper bag, because this can be dangerous when the cause is not anxiety.

Follow your personal asthma or lung-disease action plan if you have one. Do not use another person's inhaler, prescription medicine, or oxygen.

## What to expect

Rapid breathing after exertion or a short-lived stressful event may settle within minutes as the body recovers. Breathing associated with fever, pain, or infection generally improves as the underlying problem improves.

Recovery takes longer when the cause affects the lungs, heart, blood, or body chemistry. Repeated episodes may need follow-up even if they settle on their own.

Keep a note of when episodes happen, how long they last, possible triggers, and any accompanying symptoms. This can help at an appointment. Seek earlier care if the pattern changes or breathing becomes difficult at rest.

## Common questions

Is rapid shallow breathing the same as shortness of breath?

Not always. Rapid shallow breathing describes a visible or measurable breathing pattern. Shortness of breath is the feeling that breathing is uncomfortable or insufficient. You can have either symptom without the other.

Can anxiety cause this breathing pattern?

Yes. Anxiety and panic can speed up breathing and cause tingling, dizziness, or chest tightness. However, new or unusual breathing symptoms should not automatically be assumed to be anxiety.

Can I count my breathing rate at home?

Yes. While fully at rest, count each rise of the chest as one breath. Count without deliberately changing your breathing. The meaning of the result depends on age, symptoms, activity, and health history, so the number should not be used by itself to diagnose a cause.

Should I use a pulse oximeter?

A pulse oximeter can estimate blood oxygen, but it has limits and may give inaccurate readings. Do not delay care for concerning symptoms because a reading appears normal.

## Sources

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