

# Managing Shortness of Breath (Dyspnea)



Dyspnea is the feeling that you are short of breath or are having difficult, labored or uncomfortable breathing.

## People have described dyspnea as:

- |                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| "Hard to breathe"          | "I feel short of breath" |
| "I can not get enough air" | "I feel chest tightness" |
| "Suffocation"              | "It is hard to move air" |
| "My chest feels heavy"     |                          |

## Causes of Dyspnea

There are many conditions that can cause shortness of breath. These include:

- Chronic lung diseases, such as emphysema, bronchitis or asthma
- Fluid around the lungs that may be caused by heart conditions, cancers or other illnesses
- Diseases that cause weakness of the muscles you use to breathe, such as muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis, myasthenia, and many others
- General weakness due to an acute illness
- Acute infection / pneumonia

## Suggestions to decrease Dyspnea

### Find a position that is comfortable for you:

- Sit in a chair. Lean forward with your arms and upper body supported on a table.
- Stand upright. Brace yourself against the wall and lean forward a little bit.
- Lay on your back with your head up.

### Focus on your breathing pattern:

- Take slow even breaths.
- When you breathe out, put your lips together, like slowly blowing out a candle. Read the handout on **Pursed Lip Breathing**.

**Use relaxation techniques:**

- Imagery - Focus your thoughts on pleasant things, such as being with a special person, or in your favorite place, or doing a relaxing activity.
- Muscle relaxation - Slowly contract and relax each muscle group, one at a time.
- If you do not know how to do relaxation therapy, speak with your nurse.

**Use a fan** to blow air on your face.

**Plan your activities:**

- If you are doing an activity and become short of breath, stop the activity and rest.
- Rest before and between doing activities that take extra energy.

**Sometimes these suggestions will not help you control your dyspnea.** You also may need oxygen or medicines to help you breathe better. If your doctor wants you to take oxygen or medicines, you will need to learn how they help and how to use them.

**Call your doctor** if your dyspnea gets worse after trying these suggestions and the therapies ordered by your doctor.

**Dyspnea can be frightening to you and your family.** Do not be afraid to talk to your doctor, nurse, or a family member about what you are feeling. Your doctors and nurses will work with you to help you cope with your anxiety, fears, and concerns.

**If you would like more written information, please call the Library for Health Information at (614)293-3707. You can also make the request by e-mail: [health-info@osu.edu](mailto:health-info@osu.edu).**