

HEALTH IDENTIFIERS & SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS

# BREATHING DIFFICULTY

When you breathe, oxygen goes into your body. If you are having a hard time breathing, your body is not getting enough oxygen. This is also called shortness of breath, breathlessness, dyspnea, wheezing, gasping, or being winded.



## SOME FACTS about Breathing Difficulty

- Sometimes it is hard to tell if a person is having a hard time breathing.
- If a person is having difficulty breathing, it should be **taken very seriously**. It might be normal, or it might be a symptom of a serious medical problem.
  - A stuffy nose or a lot of exercise might make it harder to breathe - but this is normal.
  - Difficulty breathing could also signal a serious medical problem like a heart attack.
  - Being anxious can also cause breathing difficulties.
- Breathing problems can occur quickly, or they can begin slowly. Both need to be evaluated by a doctor.



## SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

- **LISTEN FOR:**
  - Wheezing
  - Whistle sound with each breath
  - Coughing
- **WATCH FOR:**
  - Pain when breathing
  - Using chest and neck muscle to breathe
  - Bluish/grayish color on lips, fingers or fingernails
  - Fever
  - Confusion
  - Dizziness
  - Weakness
  - Trouble Sleeping



## CAUSES

- An **object** in the mouth, nose or throat which prevents normal breathing
- **Medical problems** such as:
  - Heart disease or Heart attack
  - Asthma
  - Lung disease (COPD) such as Emphysema
  - Collapsed lung
- **Infections, such as** pneumonia and bronchitis
- **Allergic Reactions** or Allergies
- **Obesity**
- **Lack of exercise**
- **Smoking** cigarettes



## PREVENTION

- **Eat a healthy balanced diet to maintain health and a normal weight.**
- **Lose weight** if overweight or obese.
- **Exercise** daily. Get in good shape:  
*If not in good shape, begin exercising slowly and gradually increase.*
- **No Smoking.** Do NOT smoke or stay in areas where people smoke
- **Medicine.** Take your medicine daily as directed and if you have an inhaler - always carry it with you
- **Avoid Allergens.** Stay away from things that cause known allergies.
- **Be Prepared.** Carry an EpiPen, or make sure the person has their EpiPen, if they have a severe allergy and the doctor has told you to use it.

# BREATHING DIFFICULTY

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## WHAT TO DO

- If the doctor, nurse or therapist has already told you what to do when the person feels out-of-breath, **CAREFULLY FOLLOW their directions.**
- **STOP exercise** and allow rest if they are dizzy, light-headed or having trouble breathing.
- For an allergic reaction or asthma attack, **stay calm** and give the prescribed **medicine.** Then, go to the doctor if needed. (See Allergy fact sheet # 2)
- **Loosen tight clothing.**
- **Get to fresh air** (if not injured and possible).



## CALL THE DOCTOR

**Call the doctor or the nurse if:**

- There is chest pain when breathing.
- There is trouble breathing after a short walk or doing daily activities.
- One wakes up out-of-breath.
- There is an object stuck in the throat
- There is a severe cough and a fever.
- If symptoms have gotten worse than usual



## WHAT NOT TO DO

- **DO NOT give any food or drink** if there is trouble breathing.
- **DO NOT continue exercise** – Let the person rest.
- **DO NOT wait** to see what happens - get medical help right away if any of the signs of an emergency take place.



**Hard heart beat**

**Dark feeling** (nausea or vomiting)

- **Dizzy** or lightheaded
- **Can't talk**
- **Blue lips, fingers or fingernails**
- **Allergic reaction:** hives, throat closes, swollen face
- The **throat** feels like it is **closing**
- **Choking (Perform HEIMLICH MANEUVER)**
- There is an **object stuck** in the throat
- **Coughing up blood**



## DOCUMENT

- Record what activities caused the shortness-of-breath. Also, write down how quickly this happened. If medication was used, record this.
- File an Incident Report (if required) and complete other documentation such as writing down a description in the logbook if the person requires emergency medical care.



## EMERGENCY

**Call 911 immediately if there is trouble breathing AND:**

- **Chest pain** (See Chest Pain fact sheet # 6)
- **Sweating**

- **Hard heart beat**
- **Dark feeling** (nausea or vomiting)
- **Dizzy** or lightheaded
- **Can't talk**
- **Blue lips, fingers or fingernails**
- **Allergic reaction:** hives, throat closes, swollen face
- The **throat** feels like it is **closing**
- **Choking (Perform HEIMLICH MANEUVER)**
- There is an **object stuck** in the throat
- **Coughing up blood**

**If someone STOPS BREATHING perform CPR (Rescue Breathing) and call 911.**



**TO LEARN MORE - Go to these websites:**

- <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/airborne/prevent/intro.html>
- [www.webMD.com](http://www.webMD.com)
- <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/breathingproblems.html>