

What is cancer-related shortness of breath?

Shortness of breath is the feeling of not having enough air to breathe. It can also be an uncomfortable feeling while you are breathing. You can have shortness of breath when resting or when you are doing something physical, no matter how small the activity.

What happens during shortness of breath?

- Your breathing gets shallower and faster and you may feel like you do not get as much oxygen from your breaths
- Your muscles then begin to tense and you start to feel nervous to do things
- The fear of not being able to breathe makes your shortness of breath worse

What can I do to manage my shortness of breath?

1. Learn breathing exercises and positions

Breathing exercises can be helpful, especially if you have severe shortness of breath.

Abdominal breathing:

- Use this exercise if you feel breathless after an activity. Follow these steps:
 1. Relax your shoulders
 2. Place one hand on your abdomen (belly) just below your chest
 3. Count 1, 2, 3, 4, as you take a breath in and feel your abdomen rise slowly
 4. Breathe out slowly with pursed lips as you count 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
 5. Repeat this 3-4 times

Recovery breathing:

- Use this exercise any time you feel very breathless or panicky. Follow these steps:
 1. Drop your chin
 2. Breathe in and out while focusing on your breath
 3. Purse your lips and little by little, blow out for longer periods
 4. Once your breathing slows down, sit up straight and do 2-3 abdominal breaths
 5. Rest for a few minutes before starting your activities again

2. Do relaxation exercises

Relaxing can help you to slow your breathing and make your breaths more effective. Follow these steps:

1. Relax or close your eyes
2. Now breathe gently
3. Try to think of something pleasant and create a picture in your mind
4. You may like to listen to music to help you relax

3. Make lifestyle changes

Pace yourself:

- Break your activities down into smaller steps
- Plan your activities so that you have time to do them slowly and comfortably
- Keep things that you use often close by and within easy reach

Do things in ways that use less energy:

- Sit down when doing chores and getting dressed
- Avoid heavy lifting. Carry things at your waist or hold them close to your chest
- Keep your phone close by and stop to catch your breath when you are having a conversation

Showering or bathing:

- Keep the bath water shallow and lukewarm
- Open a window in the bathroom to let in fresh air and let out steam
- Sit in the shower

To climb stairs:

- Stand close to the stairs with one hand on the railing beside you
- Breathe in as you lift your leg up
- Breathe out as you place your leg on the step and raise yourself up

4. Use devices to help you save your energy

Some devices can help to cut down on the work your body needs to do in order to breath.

Tips on using devices to save your energy:

- Use pillows to raise your head when lying down
- Use a reclining chair with a footrest when sitting
- Use a walker or wheelchair if you need them
- Try using a cool fan across your face to breathe easier

5. Quit smoking

Smoking can make your shortness of breath worse. Quitting smoking is the best decision you can make, but quitting is hard. Your pharmacist or doctor can help you make a plan.

They can:

- Suggest nicotine replacements (like the patch or gum)
- Prescribe medication to help you quit
- Refer you to a smoking cessation program