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Breathing difficulties - first aid

Breathing difficulties can range from:

- Being short of breath
- Being unable to take a deep breath and gasping for air
- Feeling like you are not getting enough air

This article discusses first aid for someone who is having breathing problems.

Considerations

Breathing difficulty is almost always a medical emergency (other than feeling slightly winded from normal activity, such as exercise).

Causes

There are many different causes for breathing problems. Common causes include:

- Anemia (low red blood cell count)
- [Asthma](#)
- Being at a high altitude
- Blood clot in the lung
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), sometimes called emphysema or chronic bronchitis
- [Collapsed lung \(Pneumothorax\)](#)
- [Heart attack](#)
- Heart disease or heart failure
- Injury to the neck, chest wall, or lungs
- [Life-threatening allergic reaction](#)
- Lung cancer or cancer which has moved to the lungs
- Near drowning (fluid in the lungs)

- Pericardial effusion (fluid surrounding the heart and not allowing it to fill properly)
- Pleural effusion (fluid surrounding the lungs and compressing them)
- Respiratory infections, including [pneumonia](#), acute bronchitis, [whooping cough](#), [croup](#), and others

Symptoms

A person with breathing difficulty may have:

- [Bluish lips, fingers, and fingernails](#)
- Chest moving in an unusual way as the person breathes (flail chest or paradoxical movement)
- Chest pain
- [Confusion](#), [lightheadedness](#), [weakness](#), or sleepiness
- [Cough](#)
- Fever
- Gurgling, [wheezing](#), or whistling sounds
- Muffled voice
- Need to sit up to breathe
- Swollen tongue

First Aid

If someone is having breathing difficulty, immediately call 911 or your local emergency number, then:

- Check the person's airway, breathing, and pulse. If necessary, begin [CPR](#).
- Loosen any tight clothing.
- Help the person use any prescribed medication (an asthma inhaler or home oxygen).
- Continue to monitor the person's breathing and pulse until medical help arrives. DO NOT assume that the person's condition is improving if you can no longer hear abnormal breath sounds, such as wheezing.
- If there are open wounds in the neck or chest, they must be closed immediately, especially if air bubbles appear in the wound. Bandage such wounds at once.

- A "sucking" chest wound allows air to enter the person's chest cavity with each breath. This can cause a [collapsed lung](#). Bandage the wound with plastic wrap, a plastic bag, or gauze pads covered with petroleum jelly, sealing it except for one corner. This allows trapped air to escape from the chest, but it prevents air from entering the chest through the wound.

DO NOT

DO NOT:

- Give the person food or drink.
- Move the person if there has been a chest or airway injury, unless it is absolutely necessary.
- Place a pillow under the person's head. This can close the airway.
- Wait to see if the person's condition improves before getting medical help. Get help immediately.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call 911 or your local emergency number if you or someone else has difficulty breathing, especially if you notice:

- Blue lips, fingers, or fingernails
- Chest pain
- Coughing up large amounts of blood
- Dizziness or lightheadedness
- Excessive drooling
- Facial, tongue, or throat swelling
- High-pitched or wheezing sounds
- Hives
- Inability to speak
- Nausea or vomiting
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Sweating

Call your doctor right away if:

- Shortness of breath is brought on by coughing, especially productive coughing.
- Your child's cough has a barking sound.
- You have a fever, green or yellow phlegm, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite, or swelling in your legs.
- You are coughing up small amounts of blood.

Prevention

Some things you can do to help prevent breathing problems:

- Wear a medical alert tag if you have a pre-existing breathing condition, such as [asthma](#).
- If you have a history of severe allergic reactions, carry an epinephrine pen and wear a medical alert tag. Your doctor will teach you how to use the epinephrine pen.
- If you have asthma or allergies, eliminate household allergy triggers like dust mites and mold.
- DO NOT smoke, and keep away from secondhand smoke. DO NOT allow smoking in your home.
- If you have asthma, see the article on [asthma](#) to learn ways to manage it.
- Make sure your child obtains the whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine.
- When traveling by airplane, get up and walk around once in every few hours to avoid forming blood clots in your legs. Clots can break off and lodge in your lungs. If traveling by car, stop and walk around regularly.
- Lose weight. You are more likely to feel winded if you are overweight. You are also at greater risk for heart disease and heart attack.

Alternative Names

Difficulty breathing - first aid; Dyspnea - first aid; Shortness of breath - first aid

References

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