Managing Dyspnea (Shortness of Breath) When You Have Cancer

What is Dyspnea (Shortness of Breath)?
Dyspnea, also known as shortness of breath, is a feeling of difficult or uncomfortable breathing. It may feel like it is hard to catch your breath. You can have dyspnea at rest or when doing activities.

What causes shortness of breath?
Shortness of breath can be caused by cancer, cancer treatments or other health problems. It is important to know that being anxious or stressed can make your breathing problem worse.

What can I do to get relief and manage shortness of breath?
Before you leave the hospital, talk with your health care team about what you can do to control and manage your shortness of breath at home. It is best to have a plan in place before you become short of breath.

Here are some ways to help get relief if you become short of breath:
• Find a position that is comfortable for you:
  ▶ Sit upright 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.
  ▶ Rest by sitting up or reclining with your head elevated or propped up with pillows.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.
• **Use a fan** to help move cool air in the room and blow air on your face. Sometimes it is helpful to use a cool cloth on your face.

• **Focus on your breathing pattern:**
  ▶ Take slow even breaths.
  ▶ **Do pursed-lip breathing** to help ease shortness of breath. Practice this type of breathing when you are at rest so you can do it when you feel short of breath.
  
  **Here are the steps for pursed-lip breathing:**
  1. Breathe in (inhale) slowly through your nose for 2 seconds.
  2. Pucker your lips together as if you are going to whistle or blow out a candle.
  3. Breathe out (exhale) slowly through your pursed-lips for 4 seconds. Do not force the air out. Do not hold your breath when you are doing pursed-lip breathing.
  4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 until your breathing slows down.

• **Manage stress and anxiety:**
  ▶ When you feel short of breath, it can be scary and may cause you to be anxious. It is important to stay calm and try to relax. Anxiety can make breathing problems worse.
  ▶ Try to keep your stress levels low. If you need help with emotional support or reducing stress, talk to your doctor, nurse or social worker about other resources that may help, such as a support group or counselor.

• **Use relaxation techniques:**
  ▶ Try guided 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
  ▶ Listen to relaxing music
  ▶ Try distraction or meditation
• **Plan and pace your activities:**
  ▶ Plan your day and use your energy on activities that are important to you.
  ▶ Rest before and in-between doing activities.
  ▶ If you are doing an activity and become short of breath, **stop** the activity and rest.

**How is shortness of breath treated?**

Treatment depends on the cause of the shortness of breath. Talk with your doctor about which type of treatment would be best for you. It is important to have an action plan in place before you become short of breath. Common treatments may include:

• Breathing exercises
• Oxygen therapy
• Certain medicines:
  ▶ Pain medicine (opioids) given in certain situations to help make breathing easier
  ▶ Anti-anxiety medicine to help lower anxiety levels
  ▶ Antibiotics for an infection
  ▶ Inhaler or nebulizer to help open the airways in the lungs
  ▶ Steroids to help reduce swelling in the lungs

**When should I call my doctor?**

Shortness of breath can be a serious problem. It is important to talk to your doctor and health care team about any symptoms of shortness of breath you may have.

**Get emergency help if you have any of the following:**

• Chest pain
• Trouble speaking
• Dizziness or weakness
• Swelling of the face, neck or arms
• Wheezing that is new or gets worse
• A fever of 100.4 degrees F (38 degrees C) or higher