

# Shortness of Breath, Residual Cough

Shortness of breath, also called dyspnea, can result from cancer or cancer treatment. For example, if you have anemia, you have fewer red blood cells to carry oxygen to your tissues and organs. If you have low iron, your body can't make enough hemoglobin – the substance in red blood cells that carries oxygen. Without enough oxygen, you will feel tired and short of breath. The harder you work at breathing, the more likely you are to feel anxious – and stress can make it worse.

Perhaps you've had problems with breathing throughout treatment, or maybe it came on after treatment ended. You may have trouble breathing only when exercising or climbing stairs or it may affect you even when you are simply sitting and resting. It need not be extreme –if you are gasping for air you should call 911 immediately – you may just be more aware of your breathing or you feel pressure or tightness in your chest when you breathe.

First, discuss any breathing issues with your doctor. Treatment will depend on the cause. In addition to anemia, possible causes include a lower lung capacity (which can result from chemo or radiation treatment), a side effect of chemotherapy or radiation (which may reduce lung capacity), a lung disease such as COPD, allergy, or asthma, high anxiety or panic attacks (both can cause hyperventilation), or a heart problem. For example, if you have a heart problems, a low salt diet may ease the workload on your heart and improve your shortness of breath symptoms.

## What can you do?

- ✓ **Make sure all your doctors know your complete medical history, your current health concerns, and all the drugs you are taking, including supplements, vitamins, and over-the-counter medications.**
- ✓ **Drink, Drink, Drink!:** If you are dehydrated, your mucus will be thicker. Drink 2-3 liters a day. Avoid beverages with caffeine or alcohol – water is best.
- ✓ **Eat Well:** Good nutrition is very important to help your body recuperate from cancer and treatment. Choose high protein foods, eat 4-5 small meals instead of 3 big ones, and avoid eating a lot of foods high in sugar and salt. Consult a registered dietitian (RD or RDN) for help in identifying healthy foods.
- ✓ **Slow down:** If you get short of breath racing from one activity to another, spread out your activities and rest in between.
- ✓ **Position:** You may find it easier to breathe when you are standing, sitting upright, or keeping your head elevated during sleep. When you are upright, it makes it easier for your lungs to expand. Leaning forward when you are sitting up may also help make breathing easier.
- ✓ **Relax:** Use relaxation techniques to lower your stress level. If you become anxious, go to a quiet place, close your eyes, and take slow, deep breaths and imagine yourself in a place that has calmed you in the past. If anxiety is an ongoing problem, try contacting a therapist or counselor who can help you with deep breathing or relaxation techniques (meditation, mindfulness), or provide emotional support.

- ✓ **Move!:** You don't have to run a marathon or climb a mountain, mild exercise such as a short walk or light stretches can help. You can slowly increase your efforts. You may want to consult a trainer or a physical therapist to learn what activities are best for you.
- ✓ **Clean air:** Having a good ventilation system (cool air with low humidity) may help. Avoid irritants in the air – air pollution, dust, any substances that sets off your seasonal allergies, and emissions from refineries, factories, and vehicles. Avoid smoke-filled rooms. (If you smoke – quit!). For assistance: [NY State Smokers' Quitline](#) or call **1-866-NY-QUITS (1-866-697-8487)**.
- ✓ **Prevent infection:** Stay away from people with colds or other illnesses, wash your hands thoroughly and often, and use tissues to cover sneezes and coughs.
- ✓ **Practice controlled breathing:** Take slow, deep breaths – in through the nose and out through pursed lips (like you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake.) If you have significant lung problems, using an incentive spirometer for 15 minutes, twice a day, can help move the air into, out of, and within your lungs and help prevent pneumonia and other infections.
- ✓ **Identify triggers:** Keep a diary of your breathing issues and chest pains. If you're having symptoms write down what you have eaten, your activity level/exercise, if you've been around a pet, and how you felt before symptoms began. Look for patterns to help identify situations or substances that may bring on symptoms.
- ✓ **A cough in your body's attempt to clear your airways.** Many of the same things that cause breathing issues can also cause a cough. Residual means the cough is left over after the illness has gone away. It may also be called a nagging, lingering, persistent, or post-infection cough.

### **What Can You Do?**

You can use the tips for shortness of breath for a residual cough. In addition:

- Keep cough or sore throat lozenges handy
- Use a humidifier: Clean your humidifier regularly
- Tea with honey and lemon may help if your cough is caused by an irritated throat
- Avoid cold air (cool air is OK)
- Avoid strenuous exercise

If your breathing problems or cough get worse, become more frequent, or change in any other way, contact your doctor.