



## Short of breath?

### Are you coughing or wheezing?

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Is it becoming increasingly hard to breathe? Is exercise difficult? Are you becoming anxious and frustrated with shortness of breath? Remember shortness of breath is not a normal part of ageing.

**You may have chronic bronchitis, emphysema, asthma, or a combination of these conditions. This is often called COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease).**

### Bronchitis

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Bronchitis is a condition that affects the small airways in the lungs. The airways become inflamed (red and swollen), may become restricted and often fill with mucus. This mucus can become infected and make breathing more difficult.

Bronchitis is characterized by coughing and shortness of breath. Often, the coughing will 'bring up' mucus. If the mucus appears to be coloured yellow/green this may indicate an infection. Regular infections can cause long term lung damage and chronic shortness of breath.

Most adults have a bout of acute or short-term bronchitis at some time in their lives. Normally this lasts a week or two at the most.

People with chronic bronchitis, often have it for years, especially during winter or after a viral illness.

### Emphysema

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Emphysema, is an incurable disease whereby the small air sacs in the lungs are gradually destroyed. This makes it difficult for the lungs to transfer enough oxygen from the air into the blood.

The small airways are also affected. They become blocked and are no longer able to channel an adequate air supply to the air sacs. People with emphysema experience increasing shortness of breath. In severe cases it may become impossible to carry out regular day to day activities. Home Oxygen may be required. Cigarette smoke is one of the major causes of emphysema.

### Asthma

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Asthma is a disease of the small airways affecting up to 1 in 6 children and 1 in 9 adults. People with asthma have sensitive airways in their lungs. When exposed to triggers such as pollens and dust the airways become inflamed, mucus is produced and muscles around the airway tighten. This is called an asthma attack.

An asthma attack can occur at anytime, can be life threatening but is usually reversible with medication.

### Diagnosing Lung Disease

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To diagnose lung disease doctors may:

- use chest x-rays;
- perform a lung function test called Spirometry;
- perform a physical examination;
- ask several questions;
- look for signs and review symptoms.

### Tips to improve life if you are short of breath

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1. Be well informed. Learn as much as you can about your condition and how to manage it.
2. Understand your medications and use them according to your doctor's advice.
3. Discuss all your medications (prescription and over-the-counter) with your doctor to ensure they are compatible. Some medications taken for other conditions can make your shortness of breath worse.
4. Quit smoking. Smoking contributes to the development and worsening of lung conditions. Call the Quitline on 131 848 for help and support.
5. Exercise should be part of your daily routine. Ask your doctor or physiotherapist for advice on suitable activities.
6. Breathing exercises, including breath control, can be helpful.
7. Adequate nutrition is essential. Ask a dietitian for advice.
8. Ensure that your general health is under control. Regular influenza ('flu) and / or pneumovax vaccinations are recommended.
9. Oxygen therapy may help. Ask your doctor.
10. Join your local LungNet Support Group. Meet people with similar problems and find out how they have managed to be in control.

### More information

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For more information contact  
Asthma Foundation SA:

Freecall **1800 645 130**  
**asthmasa.org.au**  
**300 South Road, Hilton, 5033**

LungNet 1800 654 301. (Note: LungNet support groups are not in all Australian states).