Shortness of Breath

Let’s talk about shortness of breath…

- This can include any breathing problem such as difficulty breathing, tightness in the chest, inability to catch your breath, and anxiety.
- Sometimes shortness of breath can happen if you feel anxious (see Anxiety Tip Sheet).
- If your shortness of breath is new or worse than before, please contact your healthcare team.
- If you are also coughing, or have trouble talking, or cannot lie down, go to the Emergency Room.
- If you are very short of breath, have chest pain or are panting/gasping call 9-1-1 immediately.
- If you have shortness of breath and a fever (temperature greater than 38°C), contact your healthcare team immediately.

What you can do

- When resting, try to sit upright.
- Try increasing air flow to your face by using a fan, open window or humidifier.
- Turn down the temperature in your house.
- Try different relaxation and breathing exercises (e.g. pursed lip breathing).
- Conserve your energy (balance activity with rest) or use support devices (e.g. wheelchair).
- Try to do physical activity (e.g. walking 15-30 min.) at least twice a week when your breathing is normal.

Support alternatives

Seek supportive counselling or try a program such as cognitive behavioral therapy.

Other resources

Managing Shortness of Breath
Causes and Treatments
Lung Cancer Canada
https://www.lungcancercanada.ca
Managing Breathlessness (video)
More resources at mcgill.ca/rcr-rcn/patient

In your hospital

Symptom Hotlines

MUHC: (514) 934-1934 ext. 34160
JGH: (514) 340-8222 ext. 25529
St. Mary’s: (514) 734-2679, ext. 5

* If you are undergoing immunotherapy and have these symptoms please contact your healthcare team as soon as possible. Delays can increase side effects and toxicity.

** This information should not be considered as medical advice. It is not to be used in place of a visit with a doctor, nurse or other healthcare professional. If you have questions about your individual medical situation, please consult with your healthcare professional.

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