HEALTH IDENTIFIERS & SYMPTOMS OF ILLNESS

BREATHING DIFFICULTY

When you breathe, oxygen goes into your body. If you are having a hard time breathing, your body is not getting enough oxygen. This is also called shortness of breath, breathlessness, dyspnea, wheezing, gasping, or being winded.

**SOME FACTS about Breathing Difficulty**

- Sometimes it is hard to tell if a person is having a hard time breathing.
- If a person is having difficulty breathing, it should be taken very seriously. It might be normal, or it might be a symptom of a serious medical problem.
  - A stuffy nose or a lot of exercise might make it harder to breathe - but this is normal.
  - Difficulty breathing could also signal a serious medical problem like a heart attack.
  - Being anxious can also cause breathing difficulties.
- Breathing problems can occur quickly, or they can begin slowly. Both need to be evaluated by a doctor.

**CAUSES**

- An object in the mouth, nose or throat which prevents normal breathing
- Medical problems such as:
  - Heart disease or Heart attack
  - Asthma
  - Lung disease (COPD) such as Emphysema
  - Collapsed lung
- Infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis
- Allergic Reactions or Allergies
- Obesity
- Lack of exercise
- Smoking cigarettes

**SIGNES & SYMPTOMS**

**LISTEN FOR:**
- Wheezing
- Whistle sound with each breath
- Coughing

**WATCH FOR:**
- Pain when breathing
- Using chest and neck muscle to breathe
- Bluish/grayish color on lips, fingers or fingernails
- Fever
- Confusion
- Dizziness
- Weakness
- Trouble Sleeping

**PREVENTION**

- Eat a healthy balanced diet to maintain health and a normal weight.
- Lose weight if overweight or obese.
- Exercise daily. Get in good shape: 
  *If not in good shape, begin exercising slowly and gradually increase.*
- No Smoking. Do NOT smoke or stay in areas where people smoke
- Medicine. Take your medicine daily as directed and if you have an inhaler - always carry it with you
- Avoid Allergens. Stay away from things that cause known allergies.
- Be Prepared. Carry an EpiPen, or make sure the person has their EpiPen, if they have a severe allergy and the doctor has told you to use it.
# Breathing Difficulty

**What to Do**
- If the doctor, nurse or therapist has already told you what to do when the person feels out-of-breath, carefully follow their directions.
- **STOP** exercise and allow rest if they are dizzy, light-headed or having trouble breathing.
- For an allergic reaction or asthma attack, **stay calm** and give the prescribed medicine. Then, go to the doctor if needed. (See Allergy fact sheet # 2)
- Loosen tight clothing.
- Get to fresh air (if not injured and possible).

**What Not to Do**
- **DO NOT** give any food or drink if there is trouble breathing.
- **DO NOT** continue exercise – Let the person rest.
- **DO NOT** wait to see what happens - get medical help right away if any of the signs of an emergency take place.

**Call the Doctor**
*Call the doctor or the nurse if:*
- There is chest pain when breathing.
- There is trouble breathing after a short walk or doing daily activities.
- One wakes up out-of-breath.
- There is an object stuck in the throat
- There is a severe cough and a fever.
- If symptoms have gotten worse than usual.

**Emergency**
*Call 911 immediately if there is trouble breathing AND:*
- Chest pain (See Chest Pain fact sheet # 6)
- Sweating
- Rapid heart beat
- Feeling (nausea or vomiting)
- Dizzy or lightheaded
- Can’t talk
- Blue lips, fingers or fingernails
- Allergic reaction: hives, throat closes, swollen face
- The throat feels like it is closing
- Choking (Perform HEIMLICH MANEUVER)
- There is an object stuck in the throat
- Coughing up blood

If someone stops breathing perform CPR (Rescue Breathing) and call 911.

**Document**
- Record what activities caused the shortness-of-breath. Also, write down how quickly this happened. If medication was used, record this.
- File an Incident Report (if required) and complete other documentation such as writing down a description in the logbook if the person requires emergency medical care.

**To Learn More – Go to these websites:**
- www.webMD.com

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The Health Identifiers and Symptoms of Illness Series has been developed by the Connecticut Department of Developmental Services to serve as a resource for consumers, families and personal support professionals. The information contained in this series is not a substitute for personal professional examination and treatment provided by a health care professional. Always follow the instructions and advice of your doctor or other health professional.