

Opioids for Shortness of Breath in Advanced Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)

Opioids for Shortness of Breath in Advanced COPD

- Shortness of breath is the most common symptom for people with advanced Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD).
- Feeling short of breath can be scary for you and your loved ones, **but it will not harm you.**
- You may try to limit your activities to avoid feeling short of breath, but it is important to stay as active as you can. Being fit helps to lower shortness of breath.
- If you feel short of breath, you may think it is because your oxygen levels are low, but they may be OK. **Shortness of breath and low oxygen levels are not the same thing.** If your oxygen levels are OK, you may need other treatments for shortness of breath.
- Over time, shortness of breath can get harder to control. Sometimes, standard COPD treatments do not give you relief. Opioids (like morphine or similar medications) may help.

What causes shortness of breath?

- COPD causes physical changes to your body and lungs. This can lead to shortness of breath. There may also be other reasons for your shortness of breath that are not caused by your COPD. Talk with your primary health care provider (family doctor or nurse practitioner) or other health care providers to make sure that any other causes are treated.
- Shortness of breath affects the parts of your brain that help you think, feel, and remember. This is why shortness of breath affects everyone differently, even if their lung function is similar to yours. Treatments for shortness of breath in advanced COPD help with these physical, mental, and emotional effects.

How do opioids help with shortness of breath?

- Opioids affect the parts of the brain that deal with emotions (like fear and anxiety). They can change the way you experience shortness of breath. This can be done with opioid doses (amounts) that are much lower than what is needed to control pain.
 - › For example, 1 mg of morphine syrup is similar to taking $\frac{1}{4}$ of a Tylenol® with Codeine No. 3 pill.
- Opioids may help you:
 - › feel short of breath less often.
 - › feel more comfortable.
 - › use less effort to breathe.
- It is not always possible to fully relieve shortness of breath, but hopefully your breathing will get better. If your shortness of breath is getting worse over time, your opioid dose can be increased slowly. It can also be decreased, changed, or stopped if you have side effects that bother you.

Do not stop taking your opioids without talking to your primary health care provider first.

What kinds of opioids are used for shortness of breath?

- Shortness of breath may be chronic (ongoing), acute (happens suddenly), or both.
- Chronic and acute shortness of breath are treated with different types of opioids. These may be long-acting or short-acting. The type of opioid used will depend on your symptoms. Your primary health care provider will work with you to find the opioid that is right for you.

Are opioids safe?

- You may worry about taking opioids because of what you have heard about them. For example, you may worry about getting addicted to them, or think that medications like morphine are only used when a person is dying.
- The goal is to help you manage any possible side effects and control your symptoms so that you feel better. It usually takes a much lower dose to relieve shortness of breath than it would to control pain.

What are the possible side effects?

It may take a few days for the medication to work. Early side effects may include:

- Constipation (not being able to poop). This may continue even after your body is used to the medication.
 - › It is best to try to prevent constipation instead of waiting until it happens.
 - › **Almost all people who are taking opioids need to regularly use a stool softener** (prevents constipation by making your poop softer) **or a laxative** (treats constipation by moving your poop out of your body faster).
 - › These medications (like RestoraLAX® or Senokot®) can help to keep you regular.
 - › **It is important to pay close attention to how often you poop so that you can deal with constipation as soon as possible.**

Tell your primary health care provider if you have these symptoms:

- › Tiredness that does not go away
- › Nausea that does not go away

Anxiety and depression

- Shortness of breath can make you feel anxious or panicked. Feeling anxious can also make your shortness of breath worse.
- Over time, dealing with the symptoms of advanced COPD can also make you feel sad, depressed, or hopeless. Medications used to treat anxiety and depression are not usually given for shortness of breath, although they may help in some cases.
- If you have symptoms of anxiety or depression, talk with your primary health care provider.

What are your questions?

Please ask a member of your health care team. We are here to help you.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

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<https://library.nshealth.ca/Patients-Guides>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time:
Call 811 or visit: <https://811.novascotia.ca>

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