

Taking Care of Your Lungs as You Grow Older

When you're short of breath, it's hard or uncomfortable for you to take in the oxygen your body needs. You may feel as if you're not getting enough air. Sometimes mild breathing problems are from a stuffy nose or hard exercise. But shortness of breath can also be a sign of a serious disease.

Many conditions can make you feel short of breath. Lung conditions such as asthma, emphysema or pneumonia cause breathing difficulties. So can problems with your trachea or bronchi, which are part of your airway system. Heart disease can make you feel breathless if your heart cannot pump enough blood to supply oxygen to your body. Stress caused by anxiety can also make it hard for you to breathe. If you often have trouble breathing, it is important to find out the cause.

As you get older, the aging process on differ-

ent parts of your body have a direct impact on the functioning of your lungs. This can include:



Changes in your bones and muscles: Results in lower oxygen levels in the blood that supplies your body. Also, less carbon dioxide is removed from your body. Symptoms such as tiredness and shortness of breath can result.

Changes in lung tissue: Allows air to get trapped in your lungs. Not enough oxygen enters the capillaries and less carbon dioxide is removed. This makes breathing hard.

Changes in the nervous system: Nerves in your airways that trigger coughing are not as sensitive to particles such as smoke or germs. Large amounts of particles can collect in the lungs and are hard to cough up.

Changes in the immune system: Means your body is less able to fight lung infections and other diseases.

As a result of these changes, older persons are at increased risk of:

- Lung infections, such as pneumonia and bronchitis
- Shortness of breath
- Low oxygen level, which reduces the body's ability to fight diseases
- Abnormal breathing patterns, resulting in problems such as sleep apnea (episodes of stopped breathing during sleep)

However, there are several things that you can do to decrease the effects of aging on the lungs:

- Do not smoke. Smoking harms the lungs and speeds up aging of the lungs.
- Do physical exercise to improve lung function.
- Be up and about. Lying in bed or sitting for long periods allows mucus to collect in the lungs. This puts you at risk of lung infections. This is especially true right after surgery or when you are ill.