



State of Minnesota
The Office of Ombudsman for
Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities



Breathing Alert – think **pink**, not **blue**!



This Medical Alert is based on the work of the Medical Review Subcommittee and should be posted prominently. The Office of the Ombudsman for Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities works to improve the services provided to people with disabilities by communicating important information found in the Medical Review Subcommittee's reviews of deaths and serious injuries. Thank you for promptly reporting deaths and serious injuries. You are helping us to meet our mission.

This office continues to receive reports of the deaths of clients with breathing difficulties (also called shortness of breath or dyspnea). Staff members carefully monitor clients with breathing difficulties - sometimes for hours - until the client stops breathing and then call 911 for emergency assistance that may arrive too late.

Breathing difficulties can range from being short of breath, unable to take a deep breath, gasping for air, or feeling like you are not getting enough air.

Normal vital sign ranges for the average healthy adult while resting are:

- Blood pressure: 90/60 mm/Hg to 120/80 mm/Hg
- **Breathing: 12 - 18 breaths per minute**
- Pulse: 60 - 100 beats per minute
- Temperature: 97.8 - 99.1 degrees Fahrenheit / average 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit

(From <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002341.htm>)

There are many different causes for breathing problems. Common causes include:

- Asthma
- Being at a high altitude
- Blood clot in the lung
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Collapsed lung
- Heart attack
- Heart disease or heart failure
- Injury to the neck, chest wall, or lungs
- Life-threatening allergic reaction
- Respiratory infections, including pneumonia, acute bronchitis, whooping cough, croup, and others

A person with breathing difficulty may have:

- Bluish lips, fingers, and fingernails
- Chest moving in an unusual way as the person breathes
- Chest pain
- Confusion, light-headedness, weakness, or sleepiness
- Cough
- Fever
- Gurgling, wheezing, whistling sounds, or loud snoring

First Aid - If someone is having breathing difficulty:

1. Immediately call 911.
2. Check the person's airway, breathing, and pulse. If necessary, begin CPR.
3. Loosen any tight clothing.
4. Help the person use any prescribed medication (such as an asthma inhaler or home oxygen).
5. Continue to monitor the person's breathing and pulse until medical help arrives. **DO NOT** assume that the person's condition is improving if you can no longer hear abnormal breath sounds, such as wheezing.

DO NOT

- **DO NOT** give the person food or drink.
- **DO NOT** move the person if there has been a chest or airway injury, unless it is absolutely necessary.
- **DO NOT** place a pillow under the person's head. This can close the airway.
- **DO NOT** wait to see if the person's condition improves before getting medical help. Get help immediately.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call 911 if your client has difficulty breathing, especially if you see or are told about –

- Blue lips, fingers, or fingernails
- Chest pain
- Coughing up large amounts of blood
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Excessive drooling
- Facial, tongue, or throat swelling
- High-pitched or wheezing sounds
- Hives

- Inability to speak
- Nausea or vomiting
- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Sweating

Call your client's health care provider right away if:

- Shortness of breath is brought on by coughing, especially productive coughing. [Productive coughing means some type of secretions come up during coughing. This could be mucous or blood. The healthcare provider needs to know what the secretions look like. They could be green, yellow, white and creamy, clear, blood-tinged, dark red blood, bright red blood, or a mixture of two or more.]
- A child's cough has a barking sound.
- The client has a fever, green or yellow phlegm, night sweats, weight loss, loss of appetite, or swelling in the legs.
- The client is coughing up small amounts of blood.

Prevention – Encourage your clients to

- Wear a medical alert tag if they have a pre-existing breathing condition, such as asthma.
- Carry an epinephrine pen and wear a medical alert tag, if they have a history of severe allergic reactions.
- Eliminate household allergy triggers like dust mites and mold if they have asthma or allergies.
- Not to smoke, and keep away from secondhand smoke. Don't allow smoking in your home.
- Manage their asthma as ordered by their health care providers.
- Obtain the whooping cough (pertussis) vaccine if ordered by their health care provider. (Usually given as a Tdap booster to adults – Tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis.)
- Get up and walk around once in a while to avoid forming blood clots in their legs when traveling by airplane. Clots can break off and lodge in clients' lungs. If traveling by car, stop and walk around regularly.
- Lose weight. Clients are more likely to feel winded if they are overweight. They are also at greater risk for heart disease and heart attack.

This information is from MedlinePlus at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000007.htm>