



Patient education: Acute respiratory distress syndrome (The Basics)

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What is acute respiratory distress syndrome?

Acute respiratory distress syndrome, or "ARDS," is a serious lung condition. It happens when the lungs get inflamed and fluid builds up. A buildup of fluid in the lungs can cause problems because it can keep oxygen from getting into the blood. Then, the organs in the body do not get as much oxygen as they need.

What causes ARDS?

Different conditions can cause ARDS, but the most common causes are:

- Infection and sepsis – Sepsis is a serious illness that happens when an infection spreads throughout the body. Different kinds of infections, including viruses, can lead to sepsis.
- Breathing vomit into the lungs
- Lung infection (pneumonia)
- Serious accident or injury

What are the symptoms of ARDS?

Common symptoms of ARDS include:

- Trouble breathing
- Breathing much faster than usual
- Fingertips and lips looking slightly blue

People can have other symptoms, too. It depends on the cause of their ARDS. For example, a lung infection can cause a fever and cough.

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

Yes, as soon as possible. Many people who get ARDS are already in a hospital. But if you are not in a hospital, you (or the person with you) should call the doctor or nurse if you have any of the symptoms above.

If your doctor or nurse is not able to see you right away, or you can't reach them on the phone, go to the nearest emergency department.

Is there a test for ARDS?

Yes. The doctor will examine you and order a chest X-ray. They might also do a CT scan of your lungs. A CT scan is an imaging test that can create pictures of the inside of the body.

The doctor might also do other tests to see what's causing the ARDS.

How is ARDS treated?

ARDS is treated in the hospital, usually in the intensive care unit ("ICU").

People who have trouble breathing might be treated with high amounts of oxygen. But people who are having a very hard time breathing usually need a breathing tube. A breathing tube is a tube that goes down the throat and into the lungs. The other end is attached to a machine that helps with breathing (sometimes called a "life support" machine).

When the tube is in place, people are not able to eat or talk. Plus, they are usually sedated. That means the doctor has given them medicines to make them very sleepy. This helps them not feel pain or anxiety. Once people can breathe on their own again, the doctor can take the tube out.

If the ARDS is caused by another condition that can be treated, the doctor will treat that condition, too. For example, lung infections might be treated with antibiotics or other medicines.

What problems can happen in people with ARDS?

Different problems can happen during treatment. For example, people can get a lung infection from germs in the hospital, or other organs in the body can stop working.

Although some people with ARDS do not get better, many do. But people who get better will often have long-term lung problems caused by their ARDS. They might also be physically

weak and have thinking problems, which can happen if the brain doesn't get enough oxygen.

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