

IT'S A MEDICAL EMERGENCY!

RECOGNIZING & MANAGING ABNORMAL BREATHING LEARNER COMPANION*

"I can't Breathe" = Medical Emergency

Think medical emergency every time you hear, "I can't breathe," or like claims. **DO NOT** ignore: Act! (S)he is likely sensing *air hunger*^{5,8} (shortness of breath). Immediately tell Dispatch to send Emergency Medical Service (EMS). Monitor the person and be prepared to start Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) and/or apply an Automated External Defibrillator (AED). Follow your agency's policy, training, and always act professional.

Air Hunger

Air hunger (shortness of breath) can be caused by asthma, trauma to the chest, or to a major airway, illicit drugs, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cardiac origin, etc.^{5,8} The person may feel uncomfortable, panicked, and emotionally distressed. Air hunger is a medical emergency requiring fast medical intervention.

Breathing: Dangerous Fallacies

- One or two breaths show the person is breathing
- If a person is talking, (s)he is breathing
- Lip movement shows breathing
- Compliance and death do not look similar.

1 or 2 Breaths ≠ Breathing

Watching a person breathe once or twice does not mean (s)he is adequately breathing. Such breathing may indicate *agonal* (agony) breathing, and that death is approaching.

Talking ≠ Breathing

Myth: If a person is "talking," (s)he is properly breathing. Talking is air going over the larynx⁵. Recall from training that too many law enforcement officers (LEO) have responded, "If you're talking, you're breathing."

Lip Movement ≠ Breathing

Sporadic movements of the lips do not guarantee adequate breathing. Monitor the person until EMS arrives and be prepared to begin CPR.

Compliance or Dying?

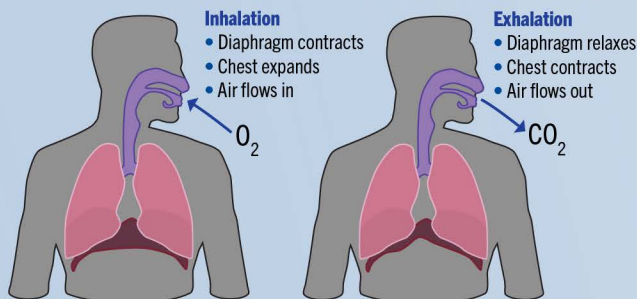
A person who suddenly becomes "compliant" after being told to "stop resisting" may in fact be dying. Unresponsiveness and death may look and act like compliance. *Continuously monitor* the person and prepare to give CPR and/or apply an AED.

Breathing (B) = V + R

The formula for adequate breathing is *ventilation + respiration*. Normally, adults breathe between 12 and 20 breaths per minute⁶.

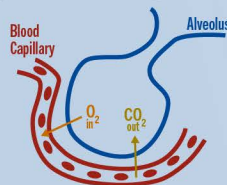
Ventilation (V)

One part of the breathing equation is *ventilation* that has two subparts: inhalation and exhalation. *Ventilation* refers to the mechanical process of moving air into and out of the lungs⁶. *Inhalation* (active process) is taking air into the lungs; *exhalation* (passive process) is removing air from the lungs.



Respiration (R)

The second part of breathing is *respiration*. *Respiration* refers to: (1) how oxygen (O_2) diffuses from the air into the lungs (Alveoli) and the blood stream; and (2) how carbon dioxide (CO_2) is then transferred from the blood into the lungs and discharged into the atmosphere^{6(p.3)}. With each breath, O_2 is brought into the lungs, and CO_2 is expelled from the lungs.



Gas Exchange and Breathing

Gas exchange is the process of oxygenating the blood and releasing CO_2 into the atmosphere⁶. A falling level of O_2 or an increase in CO_2 can cause a change in the individual's mental status. The *gas exchange process* involves three important steps: (1) ventilation; (2) perfusion; and (3) diffusion^{6(p.4)}. You cannot see if gas exchange is happening because it occurs in the microscopic *alveoli* (balloon-like air sacs) inside the lungs.

Perfusion

Perfusion (in this context) refers to blood flow through the pulmonary artery that is pulsing through the pulmonary capillaries⁶. Metaphorically, think of a train with several empty coal cars located under a large hopper filled with coal (oxygen). If the train is moving too fast (heavy breathing), the coal hopper will be drained quickly (taking a lot of oxygen from the lungs). Conversely, if the train is moving slowly (low cardiac output) or not moving at all (cardiac arrest) carbon dioxide accumulates in the blood and tissues and is not expelled from the lungs.

Diffusion

Diffusion refers to the process of the movement of CO_2 and O_2 between the lungs and blood⁶. When the concentration of CO_2 is higher, it becomes "waste air" and moves in the opposite direction of O_2 in the alveoli and then is exhaled⁶. People can experience derangement from ventilation, perfusion, or diffusion because of low O_2 or high CO_2 levels.

Carbon Dioxide Increase

A person who says "I can't breathe" may not be properly discharging CO_2 and may be actually "suffocating" from its build-up, or from low O_2 ⁵. Because the gas exchange process is not properly functioning, (s)he may be suffocating or feel like it and needs immediate medical attention. This may be the basis for saying, "I can't breathe."

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Heart Attack

A *heart attack* occurs when blood flow is interrupted to part of the heart muscle because of blockage or narrowing of arteries that supplies that area of the heart⁴. Think *plumbing* problem. Not everyone who has a heart attack will suffer a cardiac arrest.

Cardiac Arrest

Cardiac arrest is when the heart suddenly stops beating⁴. Think *electrical* problem. Cardiac arrest causes rapid unconsciousness, and without immediate intervention (AED and/or CPR) the person will usually die.

Agonal (ag-uh-ni) Respirations (breathing)

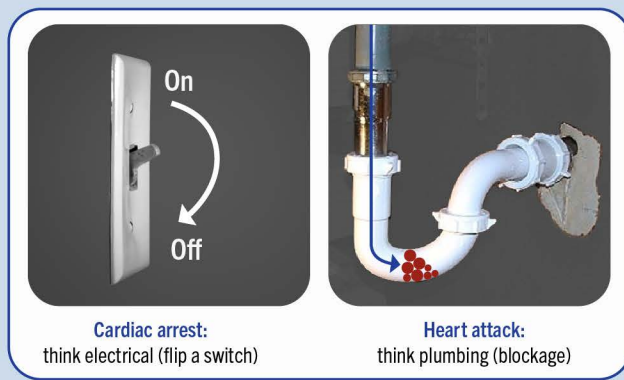
Gasping to breathe may indicate *agonal breathing* or *respirations*. Agonal respirations are often associated with cardiac arrest and are often seen before death. Agonal respirations are a brain stem reflex that occurs in 55%-60% of cardiac arrests because human tissues are not getting enough oxygen-rich blood^{1,8}. Breathing is irregular and without a constant rhythm.

Agonal Respirations Descriptions

Symptoms include: Gasping; labored breathing; snorting; snoring sounds; moaning; guttural sounds; twitching muscles; seizures; gurgling; moaning or groaning; heavy breathing; noisy breathing; and/or labored breathing^{1,2,8}. In a study, 70% of *abnormal breathing* used the following terms: snoring, snorting, and gurgling. "Death rattle" is often used but is inaccurate because it refers to a gurgling sound made when a person is dying, and excess saliva and mucus are in the throat⁸.

Common Causes of Agonal Respirations

- Cardiac arrest
- Ischemic stroke
- Hemorrhagic stroke
- Anoxia
- Drug overdose, includes opioid and narcotic overdoses⁸.



Evidence-Based Action Steps

Whether responding to a "citizen fell" call or a "suspect" who becomes nonresponsive, both transition into *patients*. **Action steps:** Notify dispatch immediately and request EMS^{2,38}; if you have an AED, get it, and apply to the person; if necessary, perform CPR^{3,8}; clear the airway of obstruction (if necessary); request a supervisor come to the scene; Reassure the person and attempt to keep the person calm; do not erroneously mistake unconsciousness for "compliance"; follow your policy; follow your training; demonstrate concern for the individual, family members, and friends.

Remember to . . .

- practice **officer safety** because the person's claim of breathing problems may be false
- know abnormal breathing signs so you can get help
- not make a diagnosis (unqualified)
- not erroneously mistake unconsciousness for "compliance"
- recall a person's mental confusion may be an early sign of inadequate oxygenation
- recall a person with breathing difficulties may be unable to comply with requests and commands
- recall the recovery position does not mean the person will recover
- assume you are being recorded (video/audio).

References

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Design: www.curtnova.com

Peer Review: D. Paul Matsenbaugh, M.D., A. David Berman, M.S. Michael Curtis, M.D.

SKU: RMAB-LC-202101

