

# **MANAGING YOUR ACUTE RESPIRATORY DISTRESS SYNDROME**

## **What Is Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome?**

Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) is a life-threatening condition caused by inflammation and injury of air sacs in the lung (alveoli). It leads to buildup of fluid in air sacs, which stops oxygen from getting to the bloodstream and the rest of the body. This can cause lung failure resulting in death.

ARDS occurs in people of all ages and equally in men and women. It is not contagious or inherited.

## **What Causes ARDS?**

ARDS often results from infections, trauma, or injury and occurs rapidly (usually within 24 to 48 hours of the cause). Other causes include aspiration of vomit; extensive burns; drug overdose; breathing in of chemicals, smoke, or other toxic fumes; and pancreatitis (inflammation of the pancreas). ARDS can lead to failure not only of lungs but other vital organs including kidneys and liver.

## **What Are the Symptoms of ARDS?**

ARDS symptoms are shortness of breath, low blood pressure, and fever. In early stages of ARDS, a fast heartbeat (tachycardia), fast breathing (tachypnea), and cyanosis (blue skin and lips) are noted. Increasing agitation, lethargy, and confusion follow in later stages.

## **How Is ARDS Diagnosed?**

Laboratory tests and imaging studies help confirm the health care provider's belief that ARDS is present. A chest x-ray perhaps provides the first clue. The health care provider may order a

catheterization (putting a thin catheter, or tube, through a neck vein into the heart) to measure pressures in the heart for diagnosis and to help guide treatment.

### **How Is ARDS Treated?**

ARDS, a medical emergency, usually means admission to the intensive care unit. Supportive treatment is used, meaning treatments support and maintain oxygen status and blood pressure. A mechanical ventilator (breathing machine) helps people breathe, and intravenous medicines maintain normal blood pressure. The ventilator is used until people can breathe on their own.

When infection causes ARDS (more than 30% of the time), antibiotics are critical for treatment and cure.

### **DOs and DON'Ts in Managing ARDS**

- ✓ **DO** remember that pulmonary fibrosis (lung scarring) is a possible complication of ARDS that can lead to long-term use of a ventilator or shortness of breath after discharge from the hospital.
- ✓ **DO** understand that ARDS is a medical emergency that requires intensive medical care.
- ✓ **DO** realize that some people surviving ARDS may suffer from some memory loss because of poor oxygen supply to the brain.
- ✓ **DO** call your health care provider if you have a fever or are short of breath.
- ⊗ **DON'T** forget that for people who survive ARDS, it may take 6 to 12 months to regain normal lung function again.

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## NOTES

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the following sources:

- ARDS Support Center Inc.: 7172 Regional Street, #278 Dublin, California 94568-2324;  
Website: <http://www.ards.org>
- National Heart Lung and Blood Institute: Tel: (301) 592-8573; Website:  
[http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Ards/Ards\\_WhatIs.html](http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/dci/Diseases/Ards/Ards_WhatIs.html)

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