ask the experts

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Sudden gasps for air at night: Possible signs of heart failure

Waking to catch your breath could mean your heart is struggling to pump blood, says cardiologist Tan Svenszeat

A blocked artery can cut off blood flow to the heart, causing breathing difficulties, especially during sleep.
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If you find yourself catching your breath while climbing the stairs or during a brisk walk, it is easy to chalk it up to a dip in stamina – especially if you have been stressed, sleeping poorly or moving less than usual.

But when shortness of breath persists and comes with signs of fluid build-up in your limbs, it may point to heart failure, a condition where the heart struggles to pump blood as well as it should, says Dr Tan Svenszeat, interventional cardiologist at Mount Alvernia Hospital.

Here, he explains why it happens and how doctors can help.

Q What is heart failure, and how does it differ from a heart attack or blocked arteries?

Heart failure is the result of an untreated heart attack caused by a blocked artery. When a blockage cuts off blood flow to the heart muscle and is not treated promptly, the muscle may be permanently damaged. Over time, that damage can leave the heart weaker or stiffer, and less able to do its job as a pump.

As a result, the heart struggles to send enough oxygen-rich blood around the body to meet its needs.

The conditions that lead to blocked arteries are, therefore, the same ones that raise the risk of heart failure. While it can happen at any age, it is more common in people who smoke and those with high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity. Managing these risk factors early can help prevent heart failure.

Q What are some overlooked symptoms that may point to early heart failure?

Early symptoms of heart failure can look as simple as mild shortness of breath during activities that, for instance, used to feel manageable. Many people may dismiss this as a fitness issue.

Over time, fluid can also start to build up. One clue is swelling in the legs or ankles. Another is waking up suddenly at night gasping for air and needing to sit up to breathe more comfortably. If these symptoms persist or worsen, it is important to seek help early.

Q How is heart failure diagnosed, and what treatment options help slow progression?

After recognising the pattern of symptoms, doctors will usually follow up with tests to confirm the diagnosis. They may start with a blood test to check if the heart is under strain; if the results raise concern, a cardiologist will arrange an echocardiogram – an ultrasound scan of the heart – to assess how well it is pumping and whether there are structural problems.

Treatment depends on the stage and the cause. In cases where heart failure is established, medications and procedures may be needed to manage symptoms and treat the underlying problem.

For example, angioplasty may be performed to open a blocked artery during a heart attack, helping to preserve heart muscle and prevent further deterioration.

For those at risk but not yet symptomatic, controlling risk factors such as high blood pressure, diabetes, high cholesterol and obesity can make a real difference.

This can be achieved by eating healthier, exercising regularly, maintaining a healthy weight and taking prescribed medicines as directed.

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