

Shortness of breath is an important signal of potential disease

December 19 2016, by Margareta Gustafsson Kubista



Credit: The University of Gothenburg

Shortness of breath is an often overlooked symptom of what may be heart failure or COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease). New research shows that with early intervention, patients can avoid suffering and the need for hospitalization decreases.

"The fact that people do not seek [medical advice](#) for their breathlessness is often due to people associating their symptoms with the natural process of aging. But if you notice that you experience increased shortness of breath during exertion, you should seek medical attention,"

declares Nasser Ahmadi, a researcher at the Sahlgrenska Academy and specialist in cardiology and general medicine at Capio Medical Center in Orust.

He studied breathlessness in several studies with different study designs and study populations. One study was population based and had about 1000 participants, while another one had about 100 patients who sought medical advice for their breathlessness in the primary healthcare setting.

It does not involve patients with acute shortness of breath, which can develop within a few days and should always be treated immediately. Instead, the focus is on chronic shortness of breath and adults who sought care after having shortness of breath for six weeks or more.

Like high blood pressure

"The patients who sought care for chronic breathlessness appeared to have a significantly impaired quality of life than the general population. They often had major problems completing everyday tasks. They suffered from different underlying diseases like a potential [heart failure](#) or a hidden [obstructive lung disease](#) that was developing," says Nasser Ahmadi.

He feels that chronic shortness of breath should be considered as an equally important warning signal as [high blood pressure](#). In order to an early detection or a correct medication of potentially chronic diseases, we need more efficient models in the primary health care to identify those who are at risk.

"My point is that the faster we identify these patients, the better prognoses we will have and the lighter the load on the healthcare system later on. Shortness of breath is often a sign of heart or lung disease because these two organs are most closely involved in the respiratory

system.

According to Nasser Ahmadi most of the studies on shortness of breath that have been conducted are associated with hospitalization, while there is significantly less research within the primary care system.

"In Sweden, few studies have been conducted in the primary care, which plays a central role in taking care of these patients," he says.

More than being out of shape

Previous research has shown that one out of three individuals over 65 years of age in Sweden may suffer from shortness of breath during exertion. The question is how to distinguish between chronic shortness of breath and poor general fitness.

"Very often, the patient recognizes that something is not right. People can compare their health with how it was previously, after all, one is his best health reference. What was I like a year ago? Was I able to do just as much or have things become considerably worse? If it is the latter, people should seek medical attention, even if you are over the age of 65 or 70," says Nasser Ahmadi.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: Shortness of breath is an important signal of potential disease (2016, December 19) retrieved 21 May 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-12-shortness-important-potential-disease.html>

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