Breathlessness in older adults

Breathlessness is common among older people but is often under-reported or hidden as a normal part of ageing. More than 9% of Australian adults report breathlessness. Many older people may have limited or blunted perception of their breathlessness and may develop various coping strategies to minimise the burden on daily activities. The terms breathlessness and dyspnoea are often used interchangeably.

Definitions

Dyspnoea is defined as a "subjective experience of breathing discomfort". Breathlessness or shortness of breath (SOB) is more commonly used to describe breathing difficulty or discomfort. Other words commonly used include chest tightness, air hunger or unsatisfied inspiration.

Breathlessness is now classed as a disease, defined by duration of symptoms acute (hours to 3 weeks), subacute (3-8 weeks), chronic (more than 8 weeks). Chronic breathlessness is breathlessness at res her. Bendopnoea is shortness of breath experienced within 30 seconds of bending over at the waist. Bendopnoea is of en associated with heart failure.

Paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnoea (PND) is at acks of severe shortness of breath and coughing that occur on lying down. It usual\$ A ag a heart failure

- obesity
- · anxiety and depression
- severe kidney dysfunct on
- anaemia
- sarcopenia
- frailty

Over 80% of pat ents with COPD experience some degree o c h % Pm f s besity is associated with exert onal dyspnoea, possibl

In addit on, frailty and poor performance in a single chair stand test is of en associated with exert onal dyspnoea. The single chair stand test assesses leg strength and endurance, with the person standing up from a chair f ve t mes without using arms or stopping in between.

Assessment

The modified Medical Research Council breathlessness scale (mMRC) is used widely to assess the funct onal impact or severity of breathlessness during daily act vities, particularly in relation to COPD. The mMRC scale is composed of four statements describing the range of disability because of breathlessness from grade 1 to 4:

- O I only get breathless with strenuous exercise
 - I get short of breath when hurrying on level ground or walking up a slight hill
- 2 On level ground, I walk slower that people of the same age because of breathlessness, or I have to stop for breath when walking at my own pace on the level
- 3 I stop for breath af er walking 100 metres or af er a few minutes on level ground

I am too breathless to leave the house or I am breathless when dressing or undressing

A score of 2 or more indicates dinically important breathlessness. Clinically important breathlessness is associated with poor quality of life, depression and anxiety.

In an acute situat on, red fags for further medical assessment include central chest pain, stridor or marked breathing ef ort with fat gue, new confusion or increased drowsiness, signs of hypoxaemia (e.g., shortness of breath, rapid breathing, fast heart rate) and haemoptysis (coughing up blood).

Management

Opt misat on of treatment of heart and respiratory