

Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome

What is acute respiratory distress syndrome?

Acute respiratory distress syndrome, or ARDS, is a serious illness that causes shortness of breath, fast breathing, and difficulty getting oxygen from the lungs to the rest of the body. ARDS occurs when the air-filled sacs in the lungs called alveoli [al-VEE-oh-LIE] fill with fluid.

What causes it?

ARDS is caused by an injury to the lungs. Your lungs can be injured by an illness, like pneumonia or a blood infection, by inhaling water or vomit, or by trauma. These injuries are believed to cause the lungs to swell. This swelling can break down blood vessels and alveoli, causing fluid to build up in the lungs.

How is it treated?

ARDS can be life threatening, so it has to be treated in the intensive care unit of the hospital. Most patients with ARDS are put on a machine called a ventilator that breathes for them, until

they are able to breathe on their own. Other treatments include medicine for pain and to treat infections.

What are the long-term effects?

Even after leaving the hospital, some patients who recover from ARDS will need to use an oxygen machine to help with shortness of breath. Some will be weak or have problems like depression or posttraumatic stress disorder. Your doctor can help you manage these problems.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

ARDS Foundation

Web site: <http://www.ardsusa.org/index.htm>

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

ARDS Network

Web site: <http://www.ardsnet.org>

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This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

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