



# Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS)

ARDS is a life-threatening condition in which the lungs become severely inflamed and can't provide the body with enough oxygen.

Most people who develop ARDS are in hospital, as it usually follows a serious illness or injury.

## What causes ARDS?

ARDS happens when the lungs become severely inflamed. It's usually a complication of a serious health condition, so most people who develop it have already been admitted to hospital.

### ARDS can be triggered by:

- an infection such as [pneumonia](https://www.blf.org.uk/pneumonia) ([blf.org.uk/pneumonia](https://www.blf.org.uk/pneumonia)) and severe flu
- blood poisoning (sepsis)
- a severe chest injury
- inhaling vomit, smoke or toxic chemicals
- near drowning
- acute pancreatitis – a serious condition where the pancreas becomes inflamed over a short period of time
- an adverse reaction to a blood transfusion

You're more at risk of ARDS if you have a history of smoking, long-term alcoholism and if you are very overweight or obese.

## What are the symptoms of ARDS?

ARDS can develop quickly. Symptoms of ARDS (and other, more common lung conditions) include:

- severe shortness of breath
- rapid, shallow breathing
- tiredness, drowsiness or confusion
- feeling faint

Call 999 if you or someone else has severe breathing problems like the symptoms above.

## How is ARDS treated?

You'll usually be admitted to an intensive care unit and helped to breathe by a mechanical ventilator. The underlying cause of ARDS will be treated too.

## Recovering from ARDS

The length of your stay in hospital will depend on the cause of your ARDS. It may be several weeks or months before you're well enough to leave hospital.

It's unusual for ARDS to cause long-term lung damage.

Being in hospital on a ventilator can weaken your muscles. Following ARDS, some people develop psychological problems, like [post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/) ([www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/)) and [depression](http://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health/depression) ([blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health/depression](http://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health/depression)) once they recover. We have more information on [how to deal with your mental health](http://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health) ([blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health](http://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/dealing-with-your-mental-health)).

The outcome of ARDS is often dependent on the underlying illness or injury. As many of these are often very serious, around a third of people who develop ARDS die from the underlying illness, although not often from ARDS itself.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: 03000 030 555

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringling our helpline will cost the same as a local call.

[helpline@blf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@blf.org.uk)

[blf.org.uk](http://blf.org.uk)

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Registered charity in England and Wales (326730), Scotland (038415) and the Isle of Man (1177)

**Code:** IS38

**Version:** 3

**Last medically reviewed:** September 2019

**Due for medical review:** September 2022

We value feedback on our information. To let us know your views, and for the most up to date version of this information and references, call the helpline or visit [blf.org.uk](http://blf.org.uk)