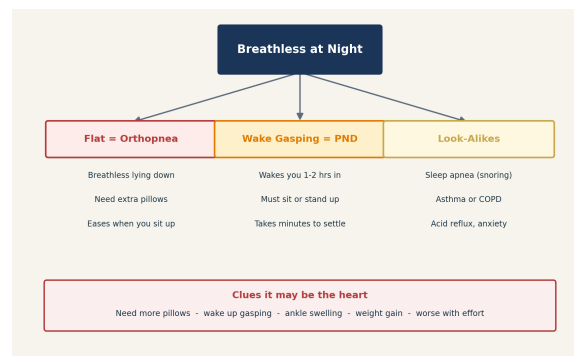


Understanding Nighttime Breathlessness

Orthopnea and Paroxysmal Nocturnal Dyspnea (PND)

Breathless When You Lie Down? Your Heart May Be Talking.



Online: <https://go.riasalimd.com/orthopnea-guide>

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Last Updated: August 2026



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Names & Terms You Will Hear

Term	Meaning
Orthopnea	Breathless when you lie flat. It eases when you sit up or prop up on pillows.
Paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea (PND)	Waking up suddenly gasping for air, usually 1 to 2 hours into sleep.
Nocturnal dyspnea	The medical term for shortness of breath at night.
Pillow orthopnea / two-pillow orthopnea	We count the pillows you need to breathe. More pillows often means more fluid.
Cardiac asthma	Old term for wheezing and breathlessness from heart fluid, not true asthma.
Congestion / fluid overload	Extra fluid backing up into the lungs and body.
Pulmonary edema	Fluid flooding the lungs - the severe end of this problem. Can be an emergency.

Call 911 now if breathlessness is severe and does not ease when you sit up, comes with chest pain, or you cough up **pink, frothy spit**. These can mean the lungs are flooding (pulmonary edema) - a medical emergency. Do not drive yourself.



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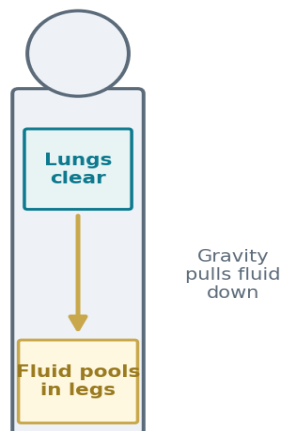


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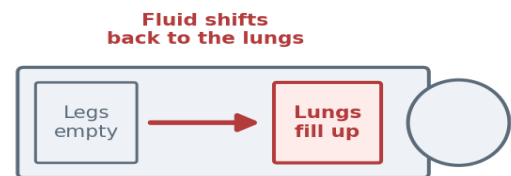
What Is Nighttime Breathlessness?

- Nighttime breathlessness means you feel short of breath when you lie down or while you sleep.
- **Orthopnea** is breathlessness that starts when you lie flat. It eases within about 10 to 15 minutes after you sit up or add pillows.
- **PND** (paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea) is different. It wakes you up gasping, often 1 to 2 hours after you fall asleep. You may rush to a window for air. It takes several minutes to settle.
- Both are classic clues that the heart is not keeping up - most often heart failure.
- Here is why it happens: during the day, gravity pulls extra fluid down into your legs. When you lie down at night, that fluid shifts back into your bloodstream and lungs. A weak or stiff heart cannot move it along, so the lungs get wet and breathing gets hard.
- Not every cause is the heart. Sleep apnea, asthma, COPD, acid reflux, and anxiety can also break up your sleep with breathlessness. The pattern helps tell them apart.
- The good news: once we find the cause, most nighttime breathlessness improves with the right treatment.

By Day: Upright



At Night: Lying Flat



This is why you feel breathless lying down

Why lying flat makes you breathless. By day, gravity pools extra fluid in your legs. When you lie down, that fluid shifts back into the bloodstream and lungs. A heart that cannot keep up lets the lungs get wet - so breathing gets hard.



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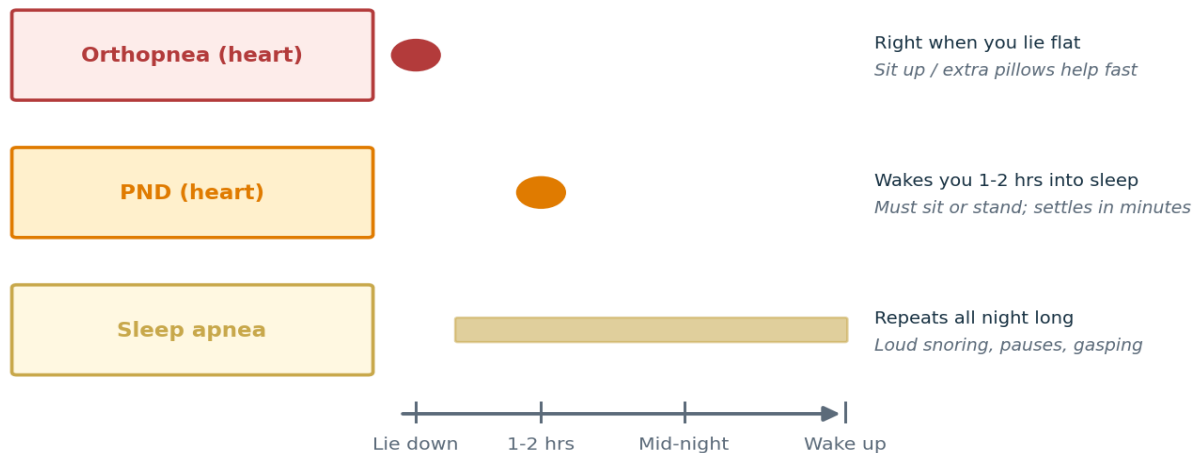
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Why It Matters

- Orthopnea and PND are among the most reliable warning signs that fluid is building up in heart failure.
- They often appear before swelling gets bad - so they give us an early chance to adjust treatment and keep you out of the hospital.
- How many pillows you need to sleep is a simple way to track your fluid. Needing more pillows than usual is a red flag.
- Waking up gasping (PND) can be frightening, but it is a treatable signal - not something to ignore or 'sleep off.'
- At its worst, fluid can flood the lungs (pulmonary edema). Sudden severe breathlessness with a cough that brings up pink, frothy spit is a 911 emergency.
- Telling the heart pattern apart from sleep apnea matters - the two often travel together, and each needs its own treatment.



When each pattern strikes across a night. Orthopnea hits the moment you lie flat and eases when you sit up. PND wakes you 1 to 2 hours into sleep. Sleep apnea repeats all night with snoring and pauses. The timing helps tell them apart.



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Pattern, Likely Cause, and the Clue That Points to It

Pattern at night	Likely cause	The clue
Breathless the moment you lie flat; eases sitting up	Heart fluid (orthopnea)	Counts in pillows; better upright in 10-15 min
Wake up gasping 1-2 hours into sleep; rush for air	Heart fluid (PND)	Sudden; takes minutes to settle; may cough
Loud snoring, witnessed pauses, gasping; sleepy by day	Sleep apnea	Repeats all night; partner notices pauses
Wheeze and tight chest, worse with triggers or a cold	Asthma or COPD	Inhalers help; often a cough or wheeze
Burning in the chest or sour taste, worse lying down	Acid reflux	Linked to late meals; eases with reflux care
Breathless with a racing heart and fear, settles with calm	Anxiety / panic	No swelling or weight gain; comes in waves



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Orthopnea - Breathless When You Lie Flat

- **What it feels like:** as soon as you lie flat, breathing gets harder. You feel better when you sit up or prop up on pillows.
- **The pillow clue:** we ask how many pillows you need to sleep. Going from one pillow to two or three is a sign that fluid is rising.
- **How fast it eases:** sitting up usually helps within 10 to 15 minutes, because gravity pulls the fluid back down out of the lungs.
- **Why it matters:** orthopnea is one of the most reliable signs of heart fluid. New or worsening orthopnea is a reason to call the office.
- **What helps:** sleep propped up, watch salt and fluid, take your water pill, and let us adjust your heart-failure medicines.



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PND - Waking Up Gasping for Air

- **What it feels like:** you fall asleep fine, then wake up 1 to 2 hours later suddenly short of breath. Many people sit bolt upright or rush to an open window.
- **Why the delay:** it takes time lying down for fluid to shift into the lungs. Once enough builds up, it triggers a gasping spell.
- **How it settles:** sitting or standing up helps, but it can take several minutes to feel normal again - longer than plain orthopnea.
- **It can be scary:** a gasping spell feels alarming, but it is a treatable warning sign, not a reason to panic. Tell us if it happens.
- **When it is an emergency:** if the breathlessness is severe, comes with chest pain, or you cough up pink frothy spit, call 911.



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Sleep Apnea - A Common Look-Alike

- **What it feels like:** loud snoring, then silent pauses, then a gasp or snort as breathing restarts. It repeats many times all night.
- **Who notices:** often a bed partner sees the pauses before you feel them. You may wake unrefreshed and feel sleepy during the day.
- **Why it is different from PND:** apnea repeats throughout the night and is driven by the airway closing, not by fluid in the lungs. But the two can happen together.
- **Why it still matters for the heart:** untreated sleep apnea raises blood pressure, strains the heart, and worsens heart failure.
- **What helps:** a sleep study confirms it. CPAP keeps the airway open. Weight loss, side-sleeping, and a dental device help milder cases.



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Risk Factors

Some patients are more likely to develop this condition. Knowing your risk helps your care team take extra precautions.

Risk Factor	Why It Increases Risk
Known heart failure (weak or stiff heart)	The heart cannot clear the fluid that shifts to the lungs when you lie down.
High blood pressure	Years of high pressure stiffen the heart, making fluid back up more easily.
Coronary artery disease or past heart attack	Damaged heart muscle pumps less well, so fluid builds at night.
Heart valve disease	A leaky or tight valve raises pressure behind the lungs.
Atrial fibrillation (AFib)	An irregular, fast rhythm lets fluid build and can trigger a sudden flare.
Obesity and sleep apnea	Both strain the heart and break up sleep with breathlessness; they often travel together.
Too much salt, fluid, or missed water pills	The most common everyday triggers of a nighttime fluid flare.
Kidney disease	Weak kidneys hold on to salt and water, adding to the fluid load.



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Treatment Options

- **Find the cause first.** An echocardiogram (heart ultrasound) checks the pump and valves. A BNP (or NT-proBNP) blood test shows whether the heart is under fluid strain. A sleep study is added when snoring or daytime sleepiness suggests sleep apnea.
- **Sleep propped up.** Use extra pillows or raise the head of the bed 4 to 6 inches. This keeps fluid out of the lungs while we treat the cause.
- **Weigh yourself every morning.** Same time, same scale, after the bathroom, before breakfast. Call us if you gain more than 3 lb in 2 days or 5 lb in a week.
- **Watch salt and fluid.** Keep sodium under about 2,000 mg a day. Your team may also set a daily fluid limit. Salt and fluid are the most common triggers of a nighttime flare.
- **Take your heart-failure medicines.** Water pills (diuretics like furosemide or torsemide) pull off extra fluid. The main heart-failure medicines (ACE inhibitor or ARNI, beta-blocker, MRA, and an SGLT2 inhibitor) treat the disease itself.
- **Treat sleep apnea if present.** A CPAP machine keeps the airway open, improves sleep, and can ease nighttime breathlessness and strain on the heart.
- **Treat the other look-alikes.** Inhalers for asthma or COPD, acid-reflux care for nighttime reflux, and support for anxiety - matched to what the workup shows.

The pillow test you can do at home. Notice how many pillows you need to breathe comfortably at night. Write it down. If you suddenly need an extra pillow or two, or you start waking up gasping, fluid may be rising - call the office before it becomes an emergency.



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Three Nighttime Patterns At a Glance

Orthopnea	PND	Sleep Apnea
• Breathless lying flat • Eases sitting up (10-15 min) • Tracked by pillow count • Heart-fluid clue	• Wakes you gasping • 1-2 hours into sleep • Takes minutes to settle • Heart-fluid clue	• Snoring with pauses • Repeats all night • Daytime sleepiness • Needs a sleep study



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Comfort Measures at Home (No Medication Needed)

These simple steps support healing and ease symptoms. Use them alongside any medication your doctor prescribes.

- Sleep propped up - use 2 or more pillows, a wedge pillow, or raise the head of the bed 4 to 6 inches.
- Keep a glass of water and your phone nearby so a gasping spell feels less frightening.
- Sit upright and let your feet hang down if you wake breathless - this moves fluid away from the lungs.
- Cut back on salty foods, especially at dinner, to ease overnight fluid build-up.
- Finish most of your fluids earlier in the day if your team set a fluid limit.
- Keep a simple log: pillows used, morning weight, and any nighttime spells. Bring it to every visit.
- Avoid large, late meals and alcohol near bedtime, which can worsen reflux and apnea.



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Risks, Benefits, and Alternatives

Every choice has trade-offs. Use this table to start the shared decision conversation.

Option	Risks	Benefits	Alternatives
Water pill (diuretic) for fluid	Too much can cause dehydration, low potassium or sodium, and kidney strain. Needs lab checks.	Pulls off the extra fluid fast. Often the quickest way to breathe easier at night.	Lower salt and fluid; treat the root heart problem; see our diuretics guide.
Full heart-failure medicines (GDMT)	Low blood pressure, dizziness, raised potassium. Doses are started low and built up slowly.	Treat the disease, not just the symptom. Cut hospital stays and help you live longer.	Diuretic alone (symptom relief only) - not enough by itself.
Sleep study, then CPAP if apnea found	CPAP takes time to get used to. Some find the mask uncomfortable at first.	Finds a hidden, treatable cause. CPAP improves sleep and eases strain on the heart.	Position changes, weight loss, and a dental device for milder apnea.
Sleep propped up only - no workup	Comfort measure only. It does not treat the cause, which may quietly worsen.	Simple, free, and helps you sleep tonight.	Pair it with an echo, a BNP test, and the right medicines.



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Common Misconceptions

Myth	Reality
Needing more pillows to sleep is just a habit.	Needing more pillows to breathe is orthopnea. It is one of the clearest signs of fluid building up. Tell your care team.
Waking up gasping is just a bad dream or anxiety.	It can be PND - fluid shifting into the lungs during sleep. Anxiety can do it too, so the cause needs to be checked, not guessed.
If I can breathe fine sitting up, my heart is fine.	Breathlessness only when lying flat is exactly the pattern of heart fluid. Feeling fine upright does not rule out a heart problem.
Snoring and waking up breathless are the same thing.	Loud snoring with pauses points to sleep apnea. PND from the heart has a different pattern. They can also happen together - both may need treatment.
Nighttime breathlessness will pass on its own.	New or worsening orthopnea or PND usually means fluid is rising. It is a reason to call us, not to wait it out.
A water pill is all I need.	A water pill relieves fluid, but the heart-failure medicines treat the cause. Most people need both.
Coughing at night is just a cold.	A dry nighttime cough, especially when lying flat, can be a fluid sign. Pink, frothy spit is an emergency - call 911.



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Possible Complications

Knowing what can go wrong helps you spot problems early. Most complications are uncommon, especially with treatment.

Where / What	What Can Happen
Lungs (acute pulmonary edema)	Fluid floods the air sacs. You feel like you are drowning and may cough up pink, frothy spit. This is a 911 emergency.
Heart (worsening heart failure)	Repeated nighttime breathlessness signals rising fluid. Left untreated it leads to hospital stays and a weaker heart.
Sleep and brain (poor, broken sleep)	Waking gasping or untreated sleep apnea robs you of deep sleep, raising fatigue, blood pressure, and rhythm problems.
Kidneys (cardiorenal strain)	Heavy fluid overload and aggressive water pills can both stress the kidneys. We watch labs closely.
Whole body (low oxygen)	Severe fluid in the lungs lowers blood oxygen, which can strain every organ if it is not treated quickly.



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Points to Know

If you remember nothing else, remember these key points.

- Orthopnea = breathless lying flat. PND = waking up gasping 1 to 2 hours into sleep. Both are heart-fluid clues.
- Track your pillows. Needing more pillows than usual to breathe means fluid may be rising - call us.
- Weigh yourself every morning. Call for a gain over 3 lb in 2 days or 5 lb in a week.
- Keep sodium under about 2,000 mg a day and follow any fluid limit you were given.
- Take your water pill and heart-failure medicines as prescribed. Do not skip doses to avoid bathroom trips.
- Sleep propped up while we sort out the cause - extra pillows or a raised bed head.
- Loud snoring, witnessed pauses, or daytime sleepiness? Ask about a sleep study for sleep apnea.
- Sudden severe breathlessness, chest pain, or coughing up pink frothy spit = call 911 now.

Learn more from our related guides: [Heart Failure \(weak pump\)](#), [Heart Failure \(stiff heart, HFpEF\)](#), [Shortness of Breath](#), [Sleep Apnea \(OSA\)](#), and [Water Pills \(Diuretics\)](#).



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When to Call Us - and When to Call 911

If you are not sure, call. We would rather hear from you twice than miss a real problem.

- Severe shortness of breath that does not ease when you sit up - call 911.
- Breathlessness with chest pain or pressure - call 911.
- Coughing up pink, frothy spit (a sign the lungs are flooding) - call 911.
- Lips or fingertips turning blue, or feeling like you cannot get air - call 911.
- Fainting or near-fainting with the breathlessness - call 911.
- Needing more pillows than usual to breathe at night, or new waking up gasping - call the office.
- Weight gain over 3 lb in 2 days, or 5 lb in a week - call the office.
- New or worse ankle, leg, or belly swelling - call the office.
- Loud snoring with pauses or gasping, plus daytime sleepiness - ask about a sleep study.

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Trusted Resources

The links below are the trusted resources Dr. Ali used to write this guide and that he recommends you visit for more information. Each is a clickable link in the digital version and a Short.io tracked URL on the printed version.

- [AHA - Warning Signs of Heart Failure](#) - Lists orthopnea and PND among the key warning signs to watch for.
- [Cleveland Clinic - Orthopnea](#) - Why lying flat causes breathlessness, and the pillow-count clue.
- [Cleveland Clinic - Paroxysmal Nocturnal Dyspnea](#) - What it means to wake up suddenly gasping for air at night.
- [MedlinePlus - Breathing Problems When Lying Down](#) - NIH/NLM overview with guidance on when this is an emergency.
- [AASM - Obstructive Sleep Apnea](#) - How to recognize the sleep-apnea pattern and what a sleep study shows.



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Sources Used to Build This Guide

Every recommendation in this guide is grounded in one or more of the studies, guidelines, or trusted resources below. Short links are tracked so Dr. Ali can see which references patients are reading; nothing personally identifying is captured.

- [American Heart Association — Warning Signs of Heart Failure \(Orthopnea/PND\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
Defines orthopnea (breathless when lying flat) and paroxysmal nocturnal dyspnea as hallmark fluid-overload symptoms of heart failure.
- [Cleveland Clinic — Orthopnea \(Shortness of Breath Only When Lying Down\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
Plain-language explanation of why lying flat worsens breathing (fluid redistribution), the pillow-count clue to severity, and that sitting up relieves it in 10-15 minutes.
- [Cleveland Clinic — Paroxysmal Nocturnal Dyspnea \(Waking Up Breathless\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
Describes PND as sudden breathlessness that wakes a person 1-2 hours into sleep, distinct from orthopnea, and its link to heart failure and sleep apnea.
- [MedlinePlus — Breathing Problems When Lying Down \(Orthopnea\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
NIH/NLM symptom overview of orthopnea/PND with triage on when nighttime breathlessness is an emergency.
- [Mayo Clinic — Heart Failure \(Symptoms and Causes\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
Lists nighttime cough and shortness of breath worse when lying down among the core symptoms that should prompt evaluation.
- [Mayo Clinic — Pulmonary Edema](#) *[Patient Education]*
Explains acute pulmonary edema — sudden severe breathlessness and pink frothy sputum at night — as a medical emergency.
- [2022 AHA/ACC/HFSA Guideline for the Management of Heart Failure](#) *[Guideline]*
Authoritative basis for orthopnea and PND as congestion signs that guide diuretic adjustment, and for BNP/NT-proBNP and echo in the workup.
- [Dyspnea, Orthopnea, and Paroxysmal Nocturnal Dyspnea — Clinical Methods \(NCBI Bookshelf\)](#) *[Reference]*
Classic clinical description of the mechanism: supine venous return and transient left-ventricular mismatch drive orthopnea and PND.
- [AASM Sleep Education — Obstructive Sleep Apnea](#) *[Patient Education]*
Distinguishes the sleep-apnea pattern (loud snoring, witnessed pauses, gasping, daytime sleepiness) from heart-failure PND.
- [American Heart Association — Lifestyle Changes for Heart Failure \(Sodium and Fluid\)](#) *[Patient Education]*
Supports the self-care steps: daily morning weights, low-sodium diet, and fluid awareness to prevent nighttime congestion.



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Version: 2026-08-15

Reviewer note: Reviewed against AHA Heart.org warning-signs page, Cleveland Clinic orthopnea and PND pages, and Mayo Clinic heart failure page. Ours adds: a side-by-side why-fluid-shifts diagram, a night-long timeline comparing orthopnea vs PND vs sleep apnea, a pattern-to-cause table, and a clear 911 callout for pink frothy sputum.

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This guide is for educational purposes only and does not replace medical advice from your physician. Recommendations may not apply to every patient. Always follow the specific instructions of Dr. Ali and your care team. In an emergency call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.



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