

Be Prepared: Palliative Care Emergencies in the Home

A Tool for Patients and Caregivers



This tool helps you know the actions you can take and reassuring words to use if your loved one is experiencing a superior vena cava (SVC) obstruction. Your healthcare provider will review the actions with you.

Actions you can take	Comforting Words
<p>Raise the person's head</p> <p>Elevate the head of the bed or raise the head on pillows to help with breathing. This will help to relieve the pressure and swelling in the head and neck.</p>	<p></p> <p><i>"It seems like you are having some trouble breathing. Let's use these pillows (or move the head of the bed) to raise you up. Does this help?"</i></p>
<p>Give medication</p> <p>If prescribed, administer dosage (only if you were shown how to do so). If there is a prescription for OXYGEN, put on the oxygen mask or nasal cannula.</p>	<p></p> <p><i>"This medication will help you. The nurse has shown me how to administer it."</i></p> <p><i>"Let me put on your oxygen mask. It will help you breathe easier. Can you let me know if it helps?"</i></p>
<p>Stay calm and be present</p> <p>Remain calm and stay with your loved one. Be there to provide comfort and safety. Some of the symptoms of SVC obstruction can be scary for your loved one to experience.</p>	<p></p> <p><i>"I'm here with you" or "I won't be leaving" or "We are taking care of you" rather than telling them, "Please calm down" or "Don't worry".</i></p> <p><i>It is important to keep talking to them and letting them know what you are doing, "I am going to keep you comfortable."</i></p>
<p>Make the person as comfortable as possible</p> <p>Loosen any tight clothing. Use pillows to support upper arms and be as comfortable as possible.</p>	<p></p> <p><i>"Do you feel tightness or pressure anywhere on your body?" or "How does it feel when you take in a breath?"</i></p>
<p>Call your healthcare team</p> <p>Contact the medical team to assess the patient's symptoms. They may arrange further tests if they feel they can make the patient more comfortable and prevent further physical problems.</p>	<p></p> <p><i>"I have contacted our healthcare team. They are ready to help us."</i></p>

- IF:**
- ✓ you feel overwhelmed and need help.
 - ✓ you feel your loved one is not feeling better after trying different strategies.
 - ✓ you are worried about superior vena cava obstruction.
 - ✓ you have questions about what to do.



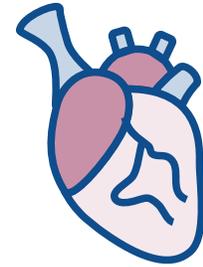
Call your Healthcare Team

Day time: _____

Evening: _____

Night time: _____

5 things you should know about Superior Vena Cava Obstruction



1 What is superior vena cava obstruction?

Superior vena cava obstruction is when a large blood vessel in your upper body, called the 'superior vena cava', gets blocked or squished.

This vein usually carries blood from your head, neck, and arms back to your heart. When it's blocked, it can cause problems.

2 What causes a blockage of the superior vena cava?

A blockage in the superior vena cava, an important vein carrying blood from the upper body to the heart, can happen when tumours grow and put pressure on it, or a blood clot blocks the vein.

As this blockage continues, it creates a lot of pressure, so the body makes new pathways for the blood to reach the heart. These pathways help blood flow better by going around the blockage. It's how the body deals with the problem and keeps the blood moving. However, these new pathways can lead to swelling, trouble breathing, and visible swollen veins.

3 What signs and symptoms should I look for?

The signs and symptoms of a blockage include:

- Swelling in the face, neck, and arms is an early sign of a possible blockage.
- Shortness of breath, especially when lying down or being active.
- A dry cough that won't go away can be caused by irritation in the airways.
- Increased pressure from the blockage may make it difficult to swallow or lead to feelings of chest pain or increased headaches.
- The skin might turn bluish in the lips, hands, or the face, and neck might look really red.

4 How can we treat a blockage of the superior vena cava?

Treatment options focus on comfort and managing the symptoms. They include:

- Medicines that can help with pain, breathlessness, and anxiety, making it easier to breathe and feel calmer. Steroids can be used to reduce pressure from anything blocking the vein.
- A prescription for oxygen can ease shortness of breath and improve oxygen levels in the blood.
- Other treatments that can help with symptoms are chemotherapy (that may reduce the size of the tumour) or surgery (insert a tube into the vein to keep it open and let blood flow). The goal of these treatments isn't to cure the disease but to help with symptoms and make the individual more comfortable.

5 When should I call the healthcare team?

When helping someone with a blockage in the superior vena cava, keep an eye out for these symptoms and situations. If you notice any of them, it's essential to contact your healthcare team right away to make sure the person feels as comfortable as possible:

- **Trouble breathing:** If the person suddenly has a lot of trouble breathing that doesn't get better with rest or changing position, it could mean the blockage is getting worse.
- **Pain that can't be controlled:** If the person has new or worse pain, and the medicines or treatments they usually use aren't helping, tell the healthcare team immediately so they can find a better way to ease the pain.
- **Mental changes:** If the person's thinking suddenly gets confused, they seem disoriented, or they lose consciousness, it's important to let the healthcare team know right away.
- **Swelling and skin colour changes:** If you see fast and significant swelling in the face, neck, or arms, and their lips or fingertips turn bluish, it could mean the blockage is getting worse and needs immediate attention.
- **Bleeding or blood clots:** If there's bleeding that won't stop, like from the mouth or nose, or if you notice strange bruises or heavy bleeding, it's crucial to contact the healthcare team right away.