Dyspnea Management Algorithm

Hyperlinks indicate additional information available in guideline sections above:
A = Assessment
M = Management
P = Pharmacological Treatment

Dyspnea screen
(0–10 scale)

Assessment
- History
- Physical assessment
- Laboratory investigation (A4)
- Imaging (A5)

Identify and treat reversible causes

Reversible Causes of Dyspnea

Cardiovascular
- Anemia
- Arrhythmia
- Heart failure
- Deconditioning
- Myocardial ischemia
- Pericardial effusion
- Pulmonary emboli

Respiratory
- Bronchial obstruction
- Bronchospasm/asthma
- COPD/emphysema
- Infection
- Interstitial Fibrosis
- Lymphangitic carcinomatosis
- Pleural effusion
- Radiation pneumonitis

Other
- Anxiety/panic disorder
- Ascites
- Cachexia
- Neuromuscular disease

Treat hypoxemia with supplemental oxygen (M2)
(if present)

Treat symptoms of dyspnea

Comfort measures (M5)
1. Air flow (fan) / environment
2. Positioning
3. Loose clothing
4. Relaxation
5. Modify lifestyle

Education (patient and caregiver)
- Breath control
- Energy conservation
- Use of breakthrough medications
- Proper inhaler technique

Pharmacological Treatments

Baseline dyspnea
Opioid (P1)
+/- Neuroleptic (P3)
+/- Steroid (P4)
+/- Benzodiazepine (P2) (for anxiety)

Incident dyspnea
Timed opioid (PO/SC/SL) (P1)
Neuroleptic (SC) (P3)

Crisis dyspnea
Opioid (IV/SC) (P1) and
Benzodiazepine (IV/SC) (P2)

Refractory dyspnea

Palliative Care Consult

Unremitting dyspnea

Palliative Sedation