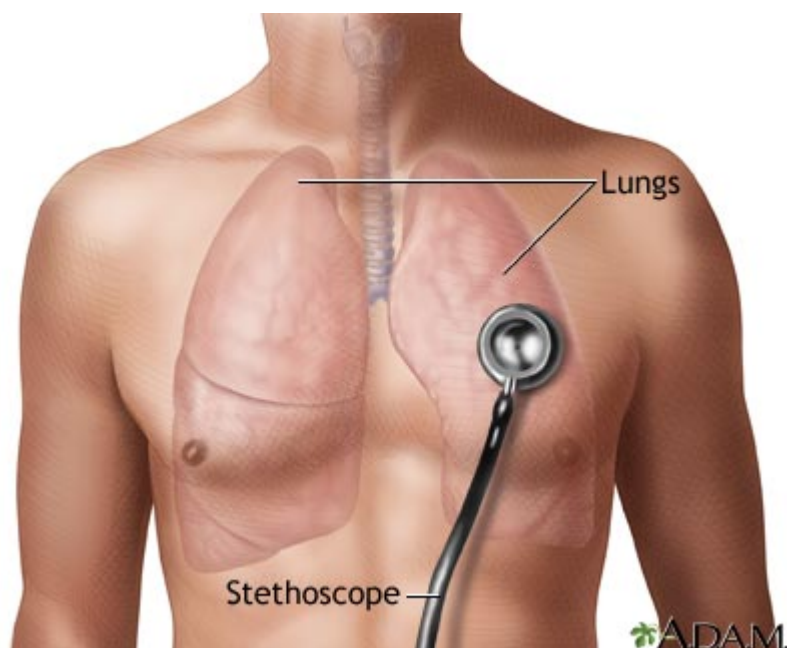


[Home](#) → [Medical Encyclopedia](#) → Breath sounds

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Breath sounds

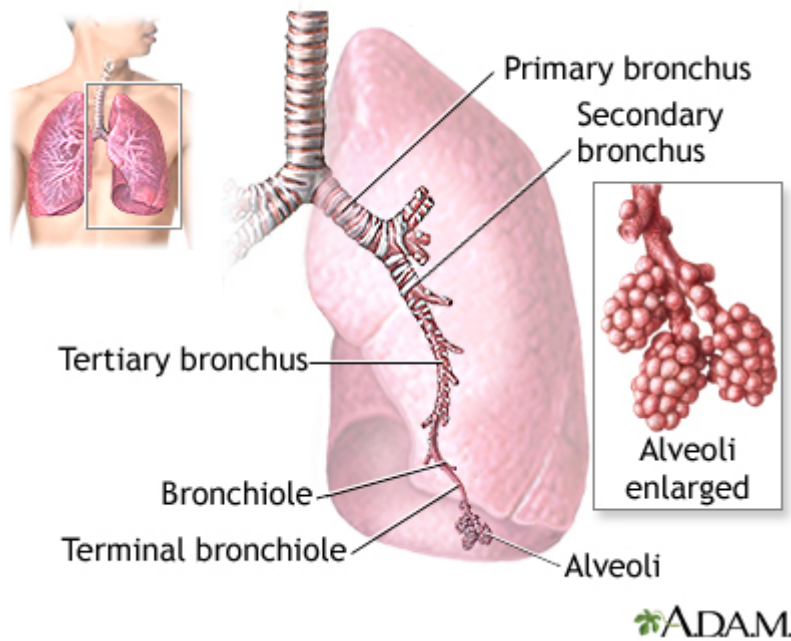
Breath sounds are the noises produced by the structures of the lungs during breathing.



Considerations

The lung sounds are best heard with a stethoscope. This is called auscultation.

Normal lung sounds occur in all parts of the chest area, including above the collarbones and at the bottom of the rib cage.



Using a stethoscope, the health care provider may hear normal breathing sounds, decreased or absent breath sounds, and abnormal breath sounds.

Absent or decreased sounds can mean:

- Air or fluid in or around the lungs (such as pneumonia, heart failure, and pleural effusion)
- Increased thickness of the chest wall
- Over-inflation of a part of the lungs (emphysema can cause this)
- Reduced airflow to part of the lungs

There are several types of abnormal breath sounds. The four most common are:

- **Rales.** Small clicking, bubbling, or rattling sounds in the lungs. They are heard when a person breathes in (inhales). They are believed to occur when air opens closed air spaces. Rales can be further described as moist, dry, fine, and coarse.
- **Rhonchi.** Sounds that resemble snoring. They occur when air is blocked or air flow becomes rough through the large airways.
- **Stridor.** Wheeze-like sound heard when a person breathes. Usually it is due to a blockage of airflow in the windpipe (trachea) or in the back of the throat.
- **Wheezing.** High-pitched sounds produced by narrowed airways. They are most often heard when a person breathes out (exhales). Wheezing and other abnormal sounds can sometimes be heard without a stethoscope.

Causes

Causes of abnormal breath sounds may include:

- Acute bronchitis
- Asthma
- Bronchiectasis
- Chronic bronchitis
- Congestive heart failure
- Emphysema

- Interstitial lung disease
- Foreign body obstruction of the airway
- Pneumonia
- Pulmonary edema
- Tracheobronchitis

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Seek medical care right away if you have:

- Cyanosis (bluish discoloration of the skin)
- Nasal flaring
- Severe trouble breathing or shortness of breath

Contact your provider if you have wheezing or other abnormal breathing sounds.

Your provider will do a physical exam and ask you questions about your medical history and your breathing.

Questions may include:

- When did the breath sound start?
- How long did it last?
- How would you describe your breathing?
- What makes it better or worse?
- What other symptoms do you have?

The provider usually discovers abnormal breath sounds. You may not even notice them.

The following tests may be done:

- Analysis of a sputum sample (sputum culture, sputum Gram stain)
- Blood tests (including an arterial blood gas)
- Chest x-ray
- CT scan of the chest
- Pulmonary function tests
- Pulse oximetry

Alternative Names

Lung sounds; Breathing sounds

References

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