



PRIMARY CARE ASSESSMENT OF RESPIRATIONS AT A DISTANCE

An [evidence-based medicine review](#) failed to find validated methods for assessing respirations remotely.

- Neither the Roth score nor pulse oximetry (either via smartphone apps or via stand alone pulse oximeter devices used by the patient at home) have sufficient evidence to support their use.
- Even assessment of dyspnea (shortness of breath) has no clear evidence base.
- The authors of this review recommend the following questions based on expert opinion alone.

Pending further research, **the recommendations below are based on expert opinion.** A rapid survey of 50 clinicians who regularly assess patients by phone ((on 20.3.20) recommended not using the Roth score (though opinions were mixed) and gave the following advice:

1. Ask the patient to **describe the problem with their breathing in their own words**, and assess the ease and comfort of their speech. Ask open-ended questions and listen to **whether the patient can complete their sentences**. “How is your breathing today?”
2. **Align with NHS111 symptom checker**, which asks three questions (developed through user testing but not evaluated in formal research):
 - “Are you so breathless that you are unable to speak more than a few words?”
 - “Are you breathing harder or faster than usual when doing nothing at all?”
 - “Are you so ill that you’ve stopped doing all of your usual daily activities?”
3. Focus on change. **A clear story of deterioration** is more important than whether the patient currently feels short of breath. Ask questions like:
 - “Is your breathing faster, slower or the same as normal?”
 - “What could you do yesterday that you can’t do today?”
 - “What makes you breathless now that didn’t make you breathless yesterday?”
4. Interpret the breathlessness in the **context of the wider history and physical signs**. For example, a new, audible wheeze and a verbal report of blueness of the lips in a breathless patient are concerning.

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[Centers for Disease Control](#) * [Massachusetts Department of Public Health](#) * [New England Quality Care Alliance](#)