

Managing Breathlessness

An Information Leaflet for Patients

Breathlessness

Breathing problems can be common in patients with heart and lung conditions. Breathlessness can be distressing and disabling for all concerned. This leaflet is aimed at giving you practical measures to help you manage these symptoms

Commonly asked questions:

Is being breathless harming me?

Breathlessness is not harmful but it is very unpleasant and frightening. It is important to remain as active as your illness allows you to be. **Heart failure patients:** *if you are experiencing increasing breathlessness please seek advice from your GP/nurse*

Is there anything I can do to stop myself feeling anxious or frightened?

It is very common for people who are breathless to feel anxious or frightened. These feelings can make your breathing worse. It is important to remind yourself that breathlessness is not in itself dangerous. **Heart failure patients** see note above.

Will oxygen help me?

Oxygen may help breathlessness in some people but it does not help everyone. If your clinician decides it may be appropriate for you they can refer you to the oxygen service for assessment.

Techniques to help you control your breathlessness

Plan:

A very important part of controlling breathlessness is to plan your activities. Decide your priorities and try not to do too much at any one time. Some activities may fill you with dread as you know they are particularly difficult for you. In these cases try to ask for help. This may be frustrating for you, but will allow you to save your energy for things that are important to you and help your confidence.

Pace:

Allow plenty of time and take breaks when you need them. Activity may increase your feeling of breathlessness but this is normal. With any activity that you find difficult such as going upstairs, it is important that you feel in control of your breathing before you start. Pace yourself so that you do not become too breathless. Try to arrange furniture in convenient places to rest, such as an extra chair in the bathroom or hallway. You may also find it helpful to arrange your house so that items that you use frequently are kept within easy reach. When you are going out consider where you can rest and if it is possible to take someone with you to carry the bags.

Relaxation:

This is a useful skill that you can learn. Relaxation does not come easily to any of us but the more you practice the easier and more effective you will find it. Try and allow yourself to have some time each day to practice your relaxation exercises. There are a wide variety of relaxation techniques, please see back page for useful websites for exercises.

Permission:

Try to be patient with yourself and give yourself time to do things. Whilst it is usual to reflect back at times, it is not so helpful to think about the things that you could do before your energy levels were limited. Try to recognise the things **that you are achieving**.

Remember to stay as active as you can.

This will prevent your muscles becoming weaker. Getting a balance between activity and rest is important, as is trying to maintain your fitness levels. It is strongly recommended that you attend a **Pulmonary/Cardiac Rehabilitation** group to help you control this condition – please speak to your clinician.

Breathing Control**How it works**

This breathing method aims to make your breathing as efficient as possible by focussing on breathing from your diaphragm. This method also guides you to taking only the air that you need to avoid unnecessary effort and to relax and calm your breathing. It may help you recover quicker from breathlessness after activity or if you feel panicky. Practice breathing control when you are not breathless for 1 to 2 minutes several times a day and increase if it feels comfortable to do so (up to 10-15 minutes) at a time, at least twice a day.

Preparation

- Place one hand on your tummy, just above your belly button.
- Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
- Rest your elbows in by your side.

Spend as long as you need on each of the following points:

- Feel the breathing movement under your hand.
 - Breathe in smoothly **through your nose**; allow your tummy to rise a little slowly and gently
 - Take in only the air you need.
 - Breathe out **through your mouth**, relax and let your tummy fall.
- Release each out breath until it comes to its natural end.
- As you breathe out narrow your mouth slightly, if this helps.
- Each time you breathe out; relax your upper chest a little more.

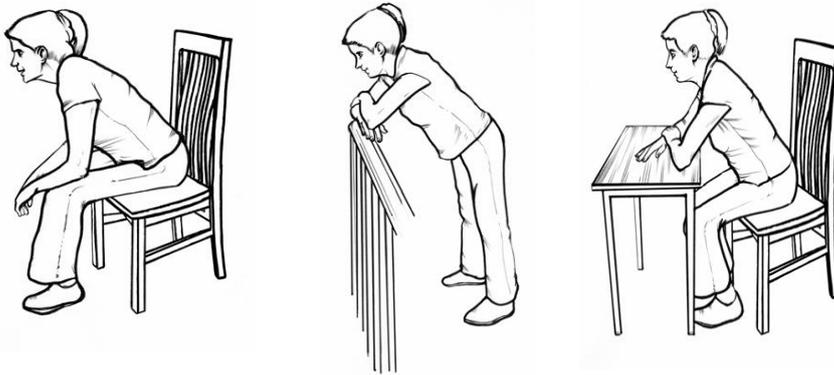
Pursed lips breathing

When using breathing techniques some people find narrowing their mouth slightly as they breathe out makes their **breathing in** feel easier. When practising pursed lips breathing narrow your mouth gradually until you feel your breathing become a little easier. Pursed lips breathing does not help everybody.

Forward lean positions

When to use

Use a forward lean position to help you recover from breathlessness after activity. When using these positions try to keep your back straight but let your head drop so your neck is relaxed. Also try to relax your wrists.



Recovery Breathing Method

For severe breathlessness or anxiety

How it works

The recovery breathing method encourages you to allow time for the air to leave your lungs as you breathe out, therefore creating more room for the next breath in. The aim of recovery breathing is to calm your breathing until you can breathe smoothly and quietly from your tummy.

When to use

Use this method when you feel extremely breathless or anxious. This is a good method to use with the hand held fan.

Recovery Breathing Method

- Take up a forward lean position.
- Use your hand held fan.
- Focus on the out breath **through your mouth**, blow onto the fan.
- Don't worry about the in breath through your nose; it will take care of itself.
- As you breathe out narrow your mouth slightly, if it helps.
- When you feel ready, blow out for longer.
- Once your breathing has eased come up straight.
- Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
- Bring your breathing back to your tummy.
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving.

General advice

- Avoid breath holding during activities e.g. climbing stairs or bending.
- 'Blow as you go', breathe out on effort i.e. blow out when bending, lifting, reaching or standing up from a chair.
- Avoid rushing. Breathless patients sometimes rush as they wrongly believe if they move quicker they will be less breathless when they get there.
- Paced breathing i.e. take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs.

Resting positions

The following positions may help if you are breathless at rest or if you are feeling very tired or exhausted from breathlessness.



Make sure you are fully over on your side. Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.

Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.

Use of a handheld fan

Cooling your face with cold air or water reduces the feeling of breathlessness. You can use a small hand held or standing fan, or simply a cool draught from an open window. You may prefer to use a cold flannel.

You may also find that the following can also help ease breathlessness:

- Desktop or floor standing fans
- Opening windows, for example in the car, to allow a cool draft of air to enter



Conserving your energy

It is important to try not to use up any energy unnecessarily. There are many ways in which you can do this:

- Consider which times of the day are best for you & plan activities around this time.
- Try to space activities out during the week & not concentrate all activities into one day.
- Do things more slowly
- Keep things you use most within easy reach
- Allow plenty of time for things like shower, bath & getting dressed afterwards
- Don't have the hot water too hot when you shower or bath because hot & steamy air can make breathing worse

- Use a soft absorbent towelling robe when you finish showering/bathing, so you don't waste energy drying yourself.
- Wear loose fitting clothes without buttons that are easy to put on & don't restrict your breathing.

Eating & drinking

Chewing & swallowing can be hard if you are breathless, preparing food can be tiring. Aiming for a healthy weight (BMI) will help you prevent muscle wastage which can cause poor breathing control.

- Take frequent small meals, rather than one large one
- Eat smaller mouthfuls
- Avoid foods that are difficult to chew, add sauces when possible
- Drink sips of fluid frequently to avoid becoming dehydrated. **Heart failure patients: remember to keep to your fluid restriction**
- Consider using frozen or prepared foods
- Consider having meals delivered to you either frozen or freshly prepared (meals on wheels)
- Consider asking friends or family for help

Distraction Techniques

This works by diverting your attention to a more pleasant thought or activity. Try simple distraction techniques such as:

- Watching TV or listening to the radio
- Doing a crossword/Sudoku puzzle
- Doing mental arithmetic
- Counting things around the room
- Playing a game on a mobile phone

All these activities seem simple but can help keep the mind away from panic associated with breathing.

A Final Thought - Keeping Calm will help your breathing

Support Groups:

Breathe Easy Milton Keynes: 01908 370053 - Gareth James

British Lung Foundation: www.blf.org.uk

Helpline: 03000 030555 (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)

British Heart Foundation: www.bhf.org.uk

Helpline: 0300 330 3311 (Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm)

Useful Websites:

<http://www.cuh.org.uk/cms/addenbrookes-hospital/services/breathlessness-intervention-service-bis/resources>

For further information please contact your GP / community matron / nurse / nurse specialist



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