



Respiratory and Home Oxygen Service

Managing your breathlessness

This leaflet has been written to offer practical advice to help you manage your stable long term breathlessness.

If your breathing becomes suddenly worse or if you have not yet seen a consultant to find out the cause of your breathlessness, it is important to seek medical advice from your doctor, GP or your specialist nurse.

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness (also called shortness of breath and dyspnoea) is a feeling of difficulty when breathing that is worse than you would normally expect for your level of physical activity.

It is a symptom of a variety of different diseases or disorders and may be either acute (happens suddenly) or chronic (has affected you for a long time).

Is being breathless harming me?

Breathlessness is not harmful, but it can be unpleasant and frightening.

Should I stop exercising?

No. It is important for you to remain as active as your illness allows you to be. This will help you to maintain your current abilities and may also help you build up some extra stamina. By maintaining an active lifestyle, you are more likely to maintain a good quality of life.

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

It is very common for people who are breathless to feel frightened and anxious. It is important to remind yourself that breathlessness is not dangerous. It can be frightening for both patients and their carers but understanding its cause and connection to our fears and emotions can help minimise its impact on our lives.

There are techniques you can use to help control your breathlessness, which will reduce feelings of anxiety. Feelings of fear and anxiety can make your breathing worse.

It is useful to try relaxation and breathing exercises when you feel that your breathing is comfortable. You can then use them when you start feeling breathless. Examples of some of these exercises are shown later in this leaflet.

Feelings of depression are also common with people experiencing breathlessness. Please speak to your health care professional, such as your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist, if you are affected by these feelings.

Remember, keeping as active as you can has been shown to be one of the most effective things you can do to boost your mood and keep feeling positive.

What can I do to help my breathlessness?

Cooling your face - Cooling your face with cold air or water (with a damp flannel on your face) reduces the feeling of breathlessness. You could use a small hand-held or standing fan.

Plan - An important part of managing breathlessness is to plan your activities. Decide what is important to do and try not to do too much at once or in any one day. When you know you need to do activities that are difficult consider asking for help.

This may be frustrating, but will allow you to conserve your energy for the things that are most important (or enjoyable) to you and will help maintain your confidence.

If you are going out, plan your route so that you know where you can rest. You may want to arrange for your shopping to be delivered.

Pace - Start your activity when you feel your breathing is comfortable. Where possible, break the activity into stages, resting between each stage as necessary to avoid becoming too breathless.

Try to arrange your furniture so that you have convenient places to rest; perhaps a chair in the bathroom or hallway.

Tasks involving carrying or bending are often difficult and you may prefer to ask for help with these. Try to keep items within easy reach (avoid high or low shelves).

You may also find it helpful to arrange your house so that items that you use frequently are kept within easy reach.

Distraction - Distraction methods can be particularly useful when you are starting to feel breathless and anxious. They work by taking the focus away from your breathing.

Common methods of distraction include counting back in 3s from 100 or trying to recall people's birthdays in each calendar month.

Visualisation - Try to visualise a relaxing scene. It could be your favourite place, a walk that you know, a garden or the beach. It could equally be somewhere from your imagination. Somewhere that makes you feel happy and secure, but not places that make you have bad or sad memories.

Will oxygen help me?

Oxygen is not a treatment for breathlessness. Generally we would use oxygen when someone has low blood oxygen levels. We have a home oxygen team who will assess you if we think this is something you might need.

The use of a hand-held fan, and pacing has been shown to be more effective in treating breathlessness than oxygen.

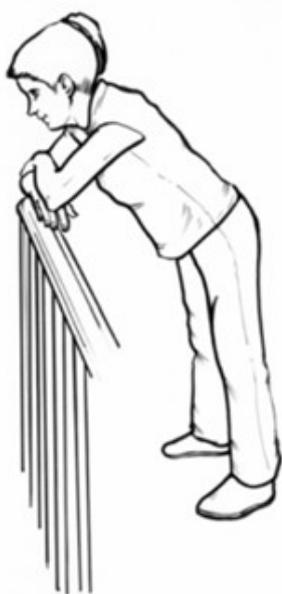
Please ask your healthcare professional for further information about these treatments.

Methods and positions to ease breathlessness

Positioning

If you experience long term breathlessness you may find that you adjust your position to allow your inspiratory (breathing in) muscles to work better. When doing this, you are likely to tense up your shoulders or grip onto things – this wastes energy and oxygen.

To ease your breathing and to save energy, try to support your arms and shoulders by resting them on your forearms instead. This will also help you to relax your shoulder and neck muscles. This can be done in a number of positions – try them all and decide which ones are best for you. Remember to use your 'breathing control' technique at the same time.



When **standing up**, try leaning from your hips with your forearms resting on something – this could be the back of a chair, a window sill, garden wall, shopping trolley handle or kitchen work surface. You may find it helpful to lean back or sideways against a support instead. Try placing your hands on your hips or stomach – remember to keep your elbows bent.

Sitting uses less energy than standing up. You may find it useful to lean forwards, resting your elbows on your knees, or on the arms of a chair, or a table in front of you. You can also try leaning back in the chair, resting your forearms on the arms of the chair, or placing your hands on your stomach.





When **lying down**, you may find it helpful to lie on your side, with your head and shoulders raised with pillows. Slightly bend your hips and knees. Make sure your head, neck, hips and knees are supported by pillows. Placing your top arm on a pillow or cushion in front of you can help you to relax your shoulders and hands.

Using a hand-held fan

When you feel breathless try to find a comfortable position; this may be sitting, standing or lying down.

You can speak with your nurse, physiotherapist or doctor for further advice on positioning

The use of a fan not only has a cooling effect, by moving the air around, it also stimulates nerves in your cheeks; this allows your brain to slow your breathing.

Hold your fan approximately six inches or 15cm from your face (or the distance you find most helpful).

Aim the draft of air towards the central part of your face, so that you feel the draught around the sides of your nose and above your top lip. Fans with three or more rotating blades seem to be most effective.

You should feel the benefit within a few minutes. Dampening your face with a cool flannel may increase the effect.

Helpful hint, remember to do your three F's together:

- **F**ocus on breathing out
- **F**an therapy
- **F**orward leaning

Breathing control

How it works - Breathing control means breathing gently, using the least effort. This method guides you to take in only the breath you need, avoiding unnecessary effort. This will help you to relax and calm your breathing.

When to use - Using breathing control will help when you are short of breath, including after activity or when you are feeling fearful, anxious or in a panic. You may wish to use this breathing method with a hand-held fan.

Breathing control exercise

- Get into a comfortable position, either sitting or standing, so that you can relax. Make sure that your arms are supported. Closing your eyes may help you to focus on your breathing and relax.
- Place one hand on your tummy, just above your belly button.

- Breathe in and out gently through your nose, if you are able to do so. If you cannot breathe in or out through your nose, breathe through your mouth instead.
- If you are breathing out through your mouth, 'pursed lip' breathing may help. To do this, imagine you are going to whistle or blow out a candle.
- As you breathe in gently, feel your tummy rise under your hand. Your upper chest and shoulders should remain relaxed.
- Breathe out and feel your tummy fall beneath your hand.
- Do not force your breath – let each breath come to a natural end.
- As you continue to practice breathing control you will feel your breathing rate slow down.

Remember the three Rs:

- **Rise - Tummy rises as you breathe in**
- **Relax - Relax tummy and breath out**
- **Rest - don't rush into next breath.**

Useful contact numbers

Specialist Team Contact

British Lung Foundation

Tel: 03000 030 555

Website: www.blf.org.uk

Email: enquiries@blf.org.uk

British Heart Foundation

Tel: 0300 330 3322

Website: www.bhf.org.uk

Email: heretohelp@bhf.org.uk

Macmillan Cancer Support

Tel: 0808 808 00 00

Website: www.macmillan.org.uk

Talking Space

A local self-referral service for anyone experiencing feelings of depression and/or anxiety.

Tel: 01865 901 222

Website: www.talkingspaceoxfordshire.org

Email: talkingspace@nhs.net

Please add your specialist team contact details for future reference:

Concerns and complaints

We aim to provide you with a high quality service at all times. However, if you have any concerns, complaints or comments about your experience of our service then please tell a member of the team or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service on freephone 0800 328 7971.

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Please send any questions or comments about this leaflet to:

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Arabic يُرجى الاتصال بنا إذا كنتم ترغبون في الحصول على المعلومات بلغة أخرى أو بتسيق مختلف.

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Portuguese Queira contactar-nos se pretender as informações noutra idioma ou num formato diferente.

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