



Managing Breathlessness

A guide to breathing techniques, medication and other things that can help you manage breathlessness.

Introduction

If you're dealing with breathlessness, this booklet can offer you some valuable support. It's designed for people with life-limiting or terminal illnesses and can be useful at any stage of your illness.

We understand that breathlessness can greatly affect your life. There are many supportive individuals and strategies that can help you manage your breathlessness, including things you can do on your own.

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness, also known as shortness of breath, is when you feel like you can't catch your breath. It can happen because of your illness. Even if you're getting good treatment for your illness, you might still experience breathlessness.

Breathlessness is different for everyone. Some people feel breathless constantly, while others have short episodes of breathlessness. These episodes can be triggered by physical activity or feeling anxious, or they may happen without any clear reason.

How might breathlessness affect you?

Breathlessness can have a big impact on your life. It can be tough to live with breathlessness. Simple daily tasks like walking, getting dressed, climbing stairs, taking a shower, or doing housework can leave you feeling out of breath. You might need help from friends, family, or professionals to manage these activities. Feeling breathless can be scary. It's normal to feel worried or anxious when you can't catch your breath.

What causes breathlessness?

Breathlessness can happen when any part of the respiratory (breathing) system isn't working properly.

The lungs

Illnesses such as COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), pulmonary fibrosis and lung cancer affect the lungs themselves.

The muscles

Illnesses which affect your muscles, such as motor neurone disease (MND) and multiple sclerosis (MS), can cause breathlessness.



The heart

If your heart isn't able to pump blood around your body as well as it should, you won't get enough oxygen to your muscles. This can make you feel breathless when you're doing even gentle physical activity. Heart failure can also sometimes cause fluid to build up in the lungs (pulmonary oedema).

Chest infections

Infections in your lungs and airways can cause breathlessness for a short time. Usually, your breathing goes back to normal once the infection is treated.

Low levels of red blood cells (anaemia)

Red blood cells carry oxygen around the body. If you have anaemia (low red blood cells, or low HB), there aren't enough red blood cells to carry the oxygen and you can feel breathless.

Anxiety

Feeling anxious or panicky can make you feel breathless. Anxiety can make you take quick, shallow breaths. This means that you don't get enough air into your lungs. This can make you feel more anxious.

Feeling breathless can make you feel anxious. You might have worrying thoughts when you feel breathless such as "I feel like I'm going to die" or "I don't want anyone to see me like this." This can make you feel anxious and panicky. And this can cause physical changes in your body that make it harder to breathe. For example, it can be hard to take a deep breath using your diaphragm.

Fatigue

Many people who have breathlessness also experience fatigue. Fatigue is a feeling of extreme tiredness, weakness or lack of energy. It's different to normal tiredness. It doesn't go away after rest or getting a good night's sleep. When your body is feeling weaker, you might not have enough energy to do your usual activities. This can mean that you feel breathless even when you only do a small amount of activity.

What can you do to manage breathlessness?

Here are a few suggestions to help you deal with feeling out of breath. It's important to figure out what's causing your breathlessness so you can use the strategies that are most likely to help you.

Breathing techniques

There are different breathing techniques you can try to control your breathing. If you need any extra help, ask your physiotherapist, doctor or hospice team.



Breathing positions

Some positions can make it easier to fill your lungs with air when you breathe in. Below are some positions that you might find helpful. Not every position will work for everyone. Try them out and see what works best for you.

1. Sit upright in a chair with your back against the back of the chair and rest your hands on your thighs.



2. Sit on a chair leaning forward with your forearms resting on your thighs.

3. Sit or stand leaning forward with your arms resting on a ledge, for example a chair or table.



4. Lean back against a wall with your feet placed a comfortable distance from the wall and slightly apart. Relax your shoulders and let your arms hang down by your sides, or rest them in your pockets.

5. If you're in bed, you can lean back against a few pillows so that you're sitting upright. Or you can lie on your side with a few pillows under your head and shoulders. Make sure the top pillow supports your head and neck. A V-shaped pillow can be helpful.



Breathing control

Breathing control means using techniques to breathe gently, using the least effort. Using breathing control will help when you are short of breath or feeling anxious. Breathing control techniques can help to let more air into your lungs and allow you to feel more in control of your breathing.

Pursed-lip breathing

Pursed-lip breathing is a technique that can be used at any time to help you control your breathing. It can help you to feel less short of breath.

Here's how to do pursed-lip breathing:

- Get into a comfortable position for your breathing.
- Breathe in gently through your nose.
- Purse your lips as if you were going to whistle.
- Blow out with your lips pursed when you breathe out.
- Do this gently for as long as it feels comfortable.
- Don't force the air out of your lungs.

This can take some practice. It might help to try it when you're not feeling breathless, so you know what to do when you feel out of breath.



Using a fan

A draft of cool air across your face can help you to feel less breathless. A small hand-held fan is cheap and you can carry it around so you have it whenever you need it. When you're inside, it might be helpful to open a window. You could also have a desk fan, or stand-up fan to create a draft of air in the room.

Your fan should be positioned so that the air is hitting one side of your face just in front of your ear. The fan can be used alongside breathing exercises to help you slow your breathing rate and recover from an episode of breathlessness more quickly.

Managing anxiety

If you feel anxious or panicky when you get breathless, trying some relaxation techniques might help. Using a fan when you feel anxious can also help you to feel more in control.

The physiological sigh

This technique can be done anywhere and is proven to reduce anxiety.

1. Take a deep inhale through the nose.
2. Once almost at capacity, take another sharp inhale through the nose to completely pop open the lungs.
3. Now, slowly exhale through the mouth. The exhale should be longer than the inhaled, but not too long.
4. Repeat this cycle as much as you need.

Anxiety support

If you're finding it difficult to cope with anxiety, you might find it helpful to talk to someone you trust. This could be a friend, family member or your doctor or nurse.

Some people find medication helps their anxiety, or speaking to a professional such as a counsellor.

Relaxing

Finding ways to relax can help you to manage breathlessness and anxiety. Try to find time to relax every day. You might find it helps to do breathing exercises, listen to music or an audiobook, spend time outside, have a bath or try meditating.



Making the most of the energy you have

If you don't have enough energy to do all the things you used to do, think about the things that are most important to you.

Make a list of the activities you want to do and select the ones that are most important. Try to include enjoyable and relaxing activities as well as work and chores.

Planning ahead

Spread your tasks throughout the week rather than doing them all in one day. Each day, think about how you'll spread your activities throughout the day. This allows you to recover after doing each task. Some people find it helpful to use a diary to plan ahead.

Pacing activities

Many people find it hard to slow down when they used to move at a faster pace. Try to take your time when you're doing activities.

Remember that you may have to ask for help to do some tasks and that's OK. Listen to your body and try to understand your limits.

Positioning

Getting into a comfortable position can save you energy. For example, sitting down to chop vegetables or sort out your laundry uses less energy than doing it standing up. When doing any activity with your arms it's useful to sit with your arms resting on a table. This reduces the amount of work that your muscles are doing. This means they don't need as much oxygen, so your lungs don't have to work so hard.

Eating well

If you get breathless while you're eating, these changes to your diet might help:

- Take your time while you're eating.
- Try softer, moist foods like soups, smoothies and pureed foods that are easier to chew and swallow.
- Try eating smaller meals and having snacks throughout the day.



Physical activity

Many people find it hard to do physical activity because they feel breathless. But keeping active can actually help your breathing. Physical activity could include walking, gardening or swimming. Or it could be moving your arms and legs in bed or practising sitting to standing movements. A physiotherapist can give you a programme of exercises designed specifically for you. Some hospitals and hospices run exercise groups designed for patients who are breathless.

When you're doing physical activity:

- You should still be able to talk in short phrases as you exercise. If you can't do this, slow down until you recover your breath.
- Try controlled breathing exercises (see page 13) to manage your breathing while you exercise.

Becoming breathless when you're exercising can be unpleasant but it's not usually harmful and it should settle with rest after a few minutes.

Smoking

Smoking can make breathlessness worse. If you smoke and want support to stop or cut down, ask your doctor or nurse.

Medicines for breathlessness

There are many different medicines that can help with breathlessness. Some medicines help to manage the illness that's causing your breathlessness, and some medicines help reduce the feeling of breathlessness. If you want to see if medication could help your breathing, chat to your Hospice Team.

Medicines which help to manage your illness

Depending on the illness or illnesses you have, your doctor may prescribe some of these medicines.

Medication	How it works	How it is used	Types
Bronchodilators	These work by expanding the airways to let more air in.	Bronchodilators can be taken as inhalers, nebulisers and tablets.	– Salbutamol
Steroids	Reduce inflammation (swelling) in the airways to help let more air in.	They can be taken as tablets or inhalers.	– Dexamethasone – prednisolone
Saline (sterile salt water)	It helps with breathlessness and it loosens any sticky mucus (phlegm) so that it's easier to cough up.	Saline can be breathed in through a nebuliser.	
Diuretics (water medicines)	These can help if your breathlessness is caused by a build-up of fluid on your lungs. They can be helpful for people with heart disease or lung disease, where this has affected how well the heart pumps.	Tablets or intravenous infusion	– Bumetanide – Furosemide

Oxygen therapy

Oxygen therapy can be helpful for some people who have breathlessness, but it's not suitable for everyone. Oxygen therapy is helpful for people who have an illness that causes low levels of oxygen in the blood. A doctor must assess you to determine if it is appropriate for your disease.

If you have oxygen therapy, your home will be checked to make sure it's safe. It's not safe to use oxygen if you or someone else smokes in your home as it can increase the risk of fires. Oxygen can be given at home using a machine called a concentrator. An oxygen concentrator is a small machine which takes room air and passes it through a filter. This increases the amount of oxygen in the air you breathe. You breathe the oxygen through a face mask or thin plastic tubes that sit just under your nostrils (nasal cannula).

Medicines which help to reduce the feeling of breathlessness

These medicines can help you to feel less breathless.

Medication	How it works	How it is taken	Types
Opioids	These may also help reduce the sensation of breathlessness.	They can be taken as a liquid, tablets or as an injection under the skin.	– Morphine – Oxycodone



Medicines for anxiety	<p>These may help you get back in control if your breathlessness is making you feel panicky</p> <p>If you're feeling anxious most of the time, medications which can help with anxiety and depression, such as mirtazapine, may be helpful.</p>	<p>Tablets or injection under the skin</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Lorazepam – Midazolam <p>Long acting:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mirtazapine
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Complementary therapies

Some people find that complementary therapies such as acupuncture, reiki and massage make them feel more relaxed, and this can help with breathlessness.

Complimentary therapies Hospice can help with include:

- Massage
- Reiki
- Breathing Exercises
- Muscular-Skeletal Assessment and Treatment
- Counselling
- Mindfulness and Thought Diffusion

Your GP or hospital doctor

Your GP or hospital doctor can help find out what's causing your breathlessness, recommend ways to manage it, and organise medication or treatment if appropriate. They can also refer you to other professionals.

Physiotherapists

Physiotherapists can teach you breathing techniques. They can also help you to plan your daily activities in a way that doesn't make you get so breathless. If you want to do more activity, physiotherapists can show you ways to exercise safely.

Occupational therapists

Occupational therapists (OTs) can recommend different techniques, equipment or changes to your home that would make it easier to carry out activities.



Breathlessness towards the end of life

Breathlessness can affect people at any stage of their illness. Sometimes someone's breathlessness can get worse as their illness progresses and they approach the end of their life. People can still use all the techniques that have helped them before, such as controlled breathing and using a fan, if it's comfortable to do so.

Sometimes the breathlessness may improve for a while as the person is less able to do activities and has to rest more.

There are medicines that can keep someone comfortable even as they become more breathless. A doctor or nurse can help with medicines if breathlessness becomes more difficult to manage. Some people experience other changes in breathing towards the end of life, including noisy breathing, shallow breathing or irregular breathing. This isn't usually distressing for the person themselves, but there may be things a doctor or nurse can do to help.

Supporting someone with breathlessness

If your friend or family member has breathlessness, there are lots of things you can do to support them:

- Understand that your relationship to the person might change as they may need you to help them with more activities.
- Talk to them about what activities are most important for them to do.
- Support them to do those activities at their own pace.
- Be prepared that you might need to take on more tasks such as cooking and cleaning. If you need extra help with this, speak to your doctor or Hospice Team.
- Support them to do breathing exercises and relaxation techniques. You could read out the instructions for them.
- Ask the person if they would like you to join them at appointments or group sessions where you can learn about breathing control too. This might make it easier for you to help them with the techniques.
- Keep rooms well ventilated by opening windows or using a fan.
- Encourage the person to talk about any fears or worries they have.

Supporting someone with breathlessness due to a terminal illness can be rewarding but it can also be very challenging. If you need extra support, speak to your GP or Hospice Team about how you're feeling.



Breathlessness diary and action plan

Keeping a diary of your breathlessness can help you to know if you feel more breathless at certain times of the day, or after doing certain activities. This can help you to plan your activities so that you don't feel so breathless.

Breathlessness diary

Every day, write down any activities you do throughout the day and how breathless you feel. Include resting as an activity. You can rate how breathless you're feeling on a scale of 0-10.

10 is the most breathless you can imagine and 0 is not breathless at all. You might find it useful to share this with your doctor or nurse. It can also be helpful to show it to your family and friends, so they can see how breathlessness affects you.



Managing breathlessness Diary

Date	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
Early morning							
Late morning							
Early afternoon							
Late afternoon							
Early evening							
Late evening							
Overnight							

