



The Palliative Care Team

Information for patients and relatives about breathlessness

This information tells you about:

- Breathlessness caused by a long term condition
- What happens when you or someone close to you is breathless
- What you can do to help
- Who to contact if you have any questions or concerns

If there is anything you are unclear about, please ask your ward nurse or doctor. If your ward nurses and doctors need further support to care for the dying person or to address your concerns they will contact the Palliative Care Team.

What is Breathlessness?

Breathlessness is an awareness of difficult or uncomfortable breathing. Although it is not harmful it can be very unpleasant and frightening.

Breathlessness can lead to anxiety and panic, to reduced activity, and to inefficient breathing – all of which can make your breathing feel worse.

The following pages are designed to help you understand breathlessness, in order to help you manage it better and improve your quality of life. It explains a number of techniques that you may find helpful.

**Remember that breathlessness in itself is not harmful –
you will continue to breathe and you will
recover your breathing**



Patient Information

The Body's Emergency Response

The sensation of breathlessness can cause the body to feel under threat.

- The body's natural response to any stressful situation is the 'fight or flight' mechanism.
- The body senses the threat – in this case, breathlessness
- The brain is alerted
- Adrenaline is released into the blood stream, creating a variety of unpleasant symptoms, such as rapid breathing, palpitations, sweating, headaches, aching muscles, blurred vision, dry mouth/throat, nausea, going to the toilet more often

Common Thoughts or Misperceptions about Breathlessness

Understanding the body's response to breathlessness can help to take away worrying thoughts.

“I need more oxygen”

Breathlessness is not always related to the level of oxygen in your blood, and oxygen does not always relieve breathlessness.

Using your hand-held fan and practicing relaxed tummy breathing - Breathing Control - will help your breathing.

“I won't be able to get my breath back”

Making yourself moderately breathless by being active is not usually harmful and you will recover your breathing.

“I'm going to pass out”

If you become extremely breathless, you tend to breathe more quickly and shallowly.

This is a very inefficient way of breathing and can make you feel light-headed. Practicing relaxed tummy breathing - Breathing Control - can prevent this from happening.

“I'm going to have a stroke or heart attack”

The 'fight or flight' response can cause your heart to beat faster, tightness in your chest and other symptoms.

Ways to help when someone is breathless

Cool Air

Cooling your face in the nose and mouth area with cold air – for example, from a hand-held fan has been shown to reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

**Please note that with COVID 19 infection:
Portable fans are not recommended with a suspected or confirmed
COVID 19 diagnosis**

- Hold the fan approximately 15cm from your face
- Aim the fan towards the central part of your face – around your nose and above your top lip
- Relief may be instant, or you may need to use the fan for 10 minutes or so before the effect is felt

You may also find the following helpful:

- Desktop or floor standing fans
- Opening doors or windows to allow a gentle breeze
- A cold wet flannel or a cool mist water spray on the face

Breathing Control

Breathing Control is gentle breathing using the abdomen, with the upper chest and shoulders relaxed. It may help with breathlessness, anxiety and panic.

For Breathing Control to become automatic, you need to practise regularly – ‘little and often’, for 10-15 minutes at a time, when you are not too breathless or anxious.

- Relax your shoulders and upper chest
- Rest your elbows by your side
- Place your hands on your tummy, just above your belly button
- Breathe in smoothly, allowing your tummy to rise
- Take in only the air you need
- Breathe out (through pursed lips if it helps), relax and let your tummy fall

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- Release each out breath until it comes to its natural end
- Each time you breathe out, relax your upper chest a little more

Pursed Lip Breathing

Breathing out through narrowed lips, as if about to whistle or blow a kiss, helps to hold the airways open. This assists air to leave the lungs, creating room for the next breath.

“Smell the roses, flicker the candle”

Recovery Breathing

If you are very panicky or breathless, if you are unable to manage Breathing Control or if it is not helping, use Recovery Breathing instead.

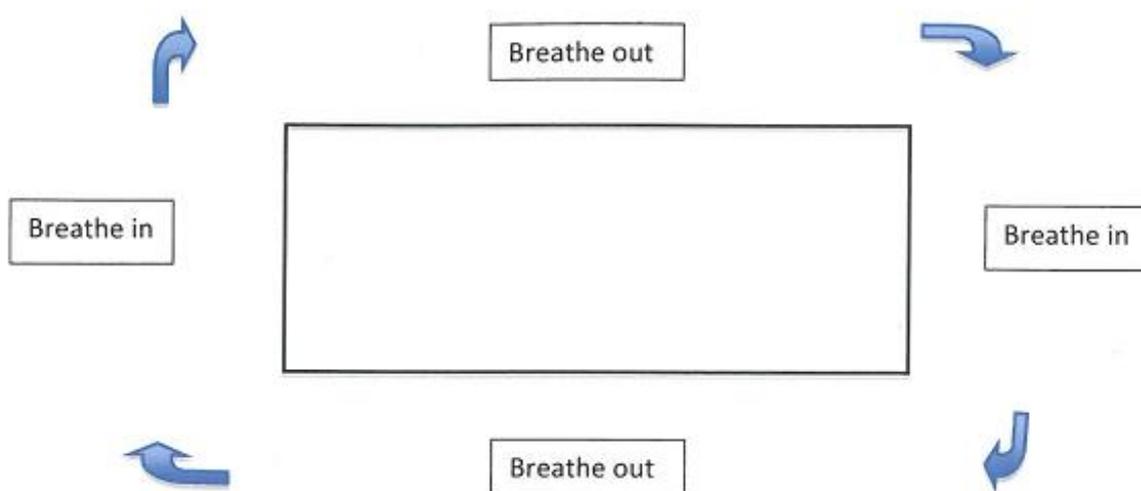
- Don't talk
- Stop moving; sit down if you can (if not, stand still or lean against a wall)
- Use your hand-held **fan**
- Adopt a **forward**-leaning position
- **Focus** on breaths out, through pursed lips if it helps – blow onto the fan
- Don't worry about the in breaths, they will take care of themselves
- When you feel ready, blow out for longer
- Once your breathing has eased, sit up straighter, relax your shoulders and upper chest, and bring your breathing back to your tummy
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving

Fan..... Forward (leaning)..... **Focus** (on out breath).....

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Rectangular Breathing

- Find something rectangular to look at, such as a window, a picture or the TV
- Let your eyes follow the edges of the rectangle
- Breathe in on the short sides and out on the long sides
- Keep going until you feel calmer and your breathing feels more in control again

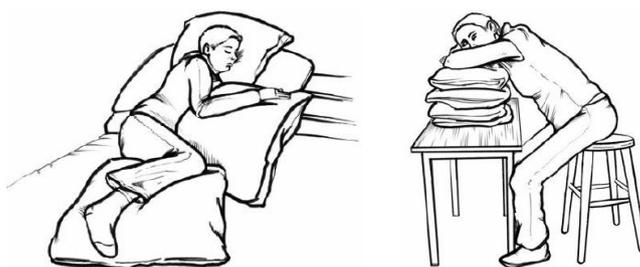


Helpful Positions

You may have found that certain positions help with your breathing when you become breathless. Below are some positions which help stabilise your shoulders and make your breathing more efficient.

At rest

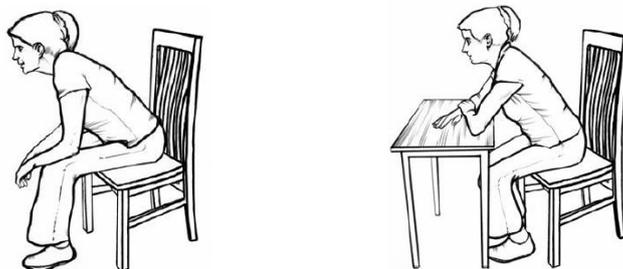
The following positions may help if you are breathless at rest, or if you are feeling particularly tired or exhausted.



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Following activity

The following positions may help to ease breathlessness after you have been active.



You can lean on a wall, a post or a walking aid if sitting is not an option.



Side lying

Side-lying may make breathing easier.



Additional Advice

- Avoid breath-holding during activities, such as climbing stairs or bending
- **'Blow as you go'** i.e. breathe out on effort; for example, blow out when bending, lifting, reaching or standing up from a chair
- Consider a walking frame or rollator to help stabilise your shoulders when walking
- Avoid rushing
- Pace your breathing with your activity; for example, take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs

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Although it may not be possible to change what is happening in the lungs or heart, we can always influence how we think, feel and behave

With thanks to the Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service, for provision of source material and inspiration and to The Myton Hospices Fatigue and Breathlessness Programme for support with adaptation of this information for UHCW NHS Trust.

Help us to get it right

If you have a complaint, concern, comment or compliment please let us know by speaking to a member of our staff. We learn from your feedback and use the information to improve and develop our services.

If you would like to talk to someone outside the service contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 0800 028 4203 or email your queries on feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact the Palliative Care Team Coordinator on 02476 965498 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

Document History

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