

Patient information

Breathlessness and how to manage it



Breathlessness

Everybody feels out of breath from time to time, especially if they have exerted themselves (eg. during exercise).

At times like these the increased pace of breathing and the increase in heart rate occurs because our body requires more oxygen to supply our vital organs. Breathlessness in this situation is expected and controllable and usually settles down quickly if we rest.



However, if you have a lung condition, or struggle with anxiety, then breathlessness can often seem to come on at the slightest exertion or for no apparent reason at all. Your breathing can often feel difficult or laboured and seem out of proportion to the activity you have carried out. This can lead to you feeling out of control, frightened and exhausted.

Normal breathing pattern

- Subconscious and automatic process

- Person looks relaxed
- Effortless
- Nose breathing
- Rhythmical, steady pattern (12—20 breaths per minute)
- Tummy movement
- Breath in slightly shorter than the breath out
- Able to talk in full sentences

Breathing with a chronic lung condition

Our bodies demand a certain amount of oxygen in order to function efficiently and effectively whether we have a lung condition or not.

People with lung conditions often struggle to breathe to meet this demand due to:

- Damaged lung tissue
- Stiff lungs
- Floppy airways
- Excess phlegm
- Muscle spasm in the airways
- Reduced lung capacity

Because of this their lungs adapt to try and overcome these issues:

- Heart will pump harder and faster to get the blood round the body more quickly to deliver the oxygen.
- Breathing will become shallower and quicker (using upper chest only when breathing).
- Breathing becomes a more manual process - having to think about breathing in and out.

This can lead to:

- Difficulty in removing the carbon dioxide (waste gas) from your lungs effectively.
- A feeling of struggling to get the air in - due to 'breath stacking'.

Symptoms of breathlessness

- Mouth breathing
- Pursed-lip breathing
- Short, shallow, quick breath (hyperventilation)
- Wheezing
- Flaring nostrils
- Noisy breathing/grunting
- Raised shoulders
- Movement at the top of the chest
- Obvious muscle movement in the neck
- Difficulty talking in full sentences
- Frequent sighing or yawning
- Blueness around lips and fingernails
- Signs of anxiety or distress
- Difficulty sitting still
- Dizziness

Never try to slow your breathing down, or hold your breath. If you are breathless, this can make your panic.

Tasks which can cause breathlessness

- Walking on the flat
- Walking on inclines
- Going up stairs
- Bending down
- Doing up shoelaces
- Making the bed
- Hanging out the washing
- Lifting
- Hoovering
- Dusting
- Ironing
- DIY
- Gardening

Other things you may struggle with if you are breathless:

- **Eating:** Eating can be very effortful and if we are unwell we can often lose our appetite. Eating also involves the process of swallowing which requires us to hold our breath - this can be difficult if we are breathless.
- **Drinking:** People with a lung condition will often reduce their fluid intake as this will reduce the number of visits to the toilet which can be very effortful if you are breathless.
- **Taking medication:** Some medications need to be taken with food and some are just hard to swallow.
- **Tiredness:** This occurs due to the increase in energy required when you are breathless and can be exacerbated by not eating or drinking.
- **Anxiety and fear:** This goes hand-in-hand with a lung condition and can be very debilitating.

All of these things can impact on your ability to function properly.

Pace yourself

People who are breathless will often rush to get a task done before they get breathless.

This is counter-productive!

Pacing yourself allows you to be more in control of your breathing and enables you to continue to manage independently for longer:

- **Plan your day:** Don't try to fit too much in—allow plenty of time to carry out tasks so that you don't have to rush.
- **Pace yourself:** Cut bigger tasks down into smaller manageable parts. Use your 'positions of ease' when you get breathless. Allow for plenty of rest periods between each task.
- **Prioritise tasks:** Which tasks can wait until you feel less breathless?
- **Adapt tasks:** Can you sit down to complete the task? Is there a simpler way to complete the task?
- **Delegate:** Can someone help you with the task?

Walking

Walking can be a very effortful task when you are breathless. Just the thought of walking a short distance can make you feel nervous which will then increase the tension around your shoulders and chest. Breathlessness can also make you feel unsteady on your feet.

During times of breathlessness the use of a walking aid can help to pace your walking, improve your balance and is also useful as it gives you something to lean on when you need to stop and catch your breath.

Remember, when walking....

- ⇒ Look for places to rest along the way.
- ⇒ Once you get there you have to be able to get back.

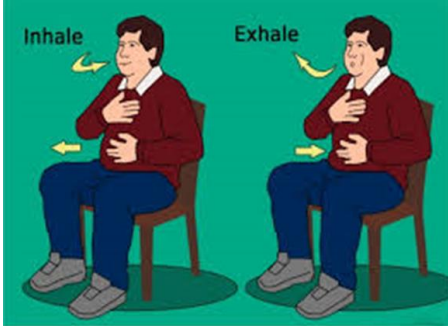
Positions of ease

During a period of breathlessness you may find some of these resting positions helpful to maximise the efficiency of your breathing and help you relax.



Breathing control (tummy breathing)

With a 'normal' breathing pattern you should see your tummy rising and falling as you breathe in and out.



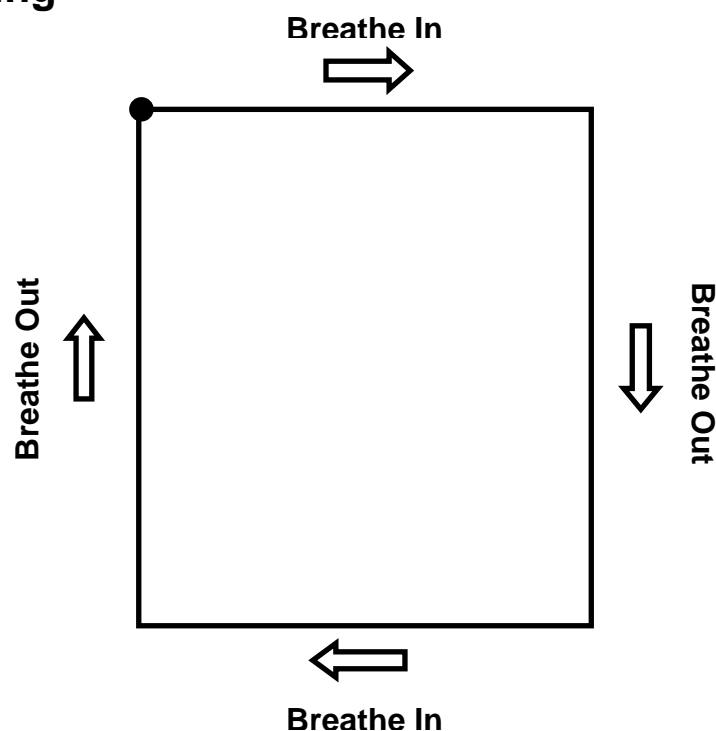
Practicing your 'tummy breathing' can help to improve the effectiveness of your breathing and strengthen your diaphragm muscle:

1. Find somewhere comfortable to sit.
2. Either sit in a reclined or upright position - with your back well supported.
3. Place a hand gently on your tummy just beneath your ribs - don't press too hard.
4. Make sure that your breathing is as steady and relaxed as possible - **not deep breaths.**
5. You should feel your hand rise as you breathe in and your hand lower as you breathe out - these are indications that your diaphragm is working properly.

Try and practice this exercise 3-4 times per day for 3-4 minutes.

Don't practice this when you are feeling very short of breath as you will find it very difficult.

Window breathing



- Place your finger on the 'dot' in the top left of the rectangle.
- As you breathe in, follow the line in the direction of the arrow to the next corner.
- Then breathe out along the next side.
- Continue around the rectangle following the instructions.

This breathing technique is helpful for getting your breathing into a more rhythmical pattern (breath in slightly shorter than your breath out).

It is also very helpful as a distraction technique for when you have an episode of breathlessness or anxiety.

Hand held fan

This technique can help to reduce the feelings of breathlessness and give the sensation of getting more air in, thus aiding relaxation. The air produced by the fan stimulates small nerve receptors in the face which in turn stimulate the brain to slow down the rate of breathing. The fan should be held approximately 15cm from the face.



Pursed lip breathing

This technique helps you to breathe in through your nose and out through 'pursed' lips. Many breathless people will adopt this method of breathing without even realising it. Breathing using this technique helps to keep your airways splinted open and therefore reduces 'air trapping'.



'Smell the rose and blow the candle'

This technique helps you to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. This can help you to pace the speed of your breathing.

Relaxation

There are many relaxation methods from cd's, to classes, to self-help DVD's and Apps for your phone. It is important to find one that works for you.

Alternatively you can be referred for relaxation sessions at the West Suffolk Hospital. Please speak to your GP, Respiratory Nurse or Physiotherapist for details.

Action Plan

When people are feeling very breathless or anxious, for whatever reason, it can be difficult for them to try and remember what to do to help themselves. It is therefore a good idea to put together an Action Plan that you can refer to during these times.

Example:

<p style="text-align: center;">My Breathlessness Action Plan</p> <p>When I feel breathless or anxious I will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Sit down in a chair (making sure my shoulders are not raised) or use my positions of ease.2) Take my reliever (blue) inhaler, using my spacer - this can take up to 20 minutes to work. <p>I will then try the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Smell the rose, blow the candle technique• Window breathing technique• Hand-held fan• Calming hand technique• Use my relaxation CD• Mindfulness colouring book <p>If after 20 minutes I still feel no better, then I will</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take my reliever inhaler again, or• Ring my family or a friend to help me through the situation

Remember to display your plan where you can see it.

Useful contacts

Physiotherapy Department

West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

Hardwick Lane, Bury St. Edmunds, Suffolk, IP33 2QZ

Tel: 01284 713300

Suffolk Community Healthcare Care Co-ordination Centre (CCC)

Tel: 0300 123 2425

If you would like any information regarding access to the West Suffolk Hospital and its facilities please visit the website for AccessAble (the new name for DisabledGo)
<https://www.accessable.co.uk>



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