

Patient information

Living with breathlessness

This booklet is based upon the experiences of people who live with breathlessness. It is aimed at helping you to manage your breathlessness.

Walking and managing gentle slopes and stairs.

You may be anxious about tackling stairs or walking up slopes especially if these have caused you shortness of breath in the past. You can increase your ability to do this without breathlessness if you use lower chest breathing (this is explained in a separate leaflet), while you walk, climb stairs or undertake any kind of activity.

You should match the rate of your breathing with your walking pace. You could try paced breathing, for example breath in on one step and out on the next two steps when you are climbing stairs. Getting this right may take some practice, so take your time matching the right number of steps to your breathing so that breathing feels comfortable.

Doing this will help you to climb stairs at a steady pace, without having to stop to catch your breath. It may also reduce the time you need to recover once you have reached the top of the staircase.

Bending

Bending from the waist makes breathing very difficult and can cause breathlessness, try not to bend over. You could however try to fully empty your lungs, (breathe out), before bending, as this will make it a little more comfortable.

One way of overcoming this is to ease yourself into a crouching position, keeping your back straight and bending from the knees, rather than from the waist. This allows you to keep your chest upright and your shoulders back which will allow you to breathe as comfortably as possible.

You will need something secure to hold on to such as a table or sofa, as you ease yourself into this position. This will provide extra support and give you something to push against as you stand. If you need to work at a level below the waist, emptying the washing machine or a cupboard, or whilst gardening, use a low stool and sit, rather than bend.

Lifting heavy loads

People find that lifting heavy items such as wet laundry or shopping bags can cause them to become tired or short of breath quickly. Try to put washing on a stool next to the clothesline. Do not carry a bag or shopping bags with your arms by your sides as the effect of heavy bags dragging your arms down restricts your breathing and can make breathlessness worse.

Use a small pack, a shopping bag on wheels or try half filling shopping bags so that they do not become too heavy. Avoid carrying heavy objects as this can cause breathlessness.

Arranging things around the house

Put items that you use most in easily accessible places. This may take some organisation, but will help to make life easier for you. Arrange things you need a lot in wall cupboards, rather than low cupboards or drawers, to avoid bending for them.

Dressing

Sit for as much as possible when dressing and use lower chest breathing throughout. Try to wear loose fitting clothes especially around the waist and chest. Avoid bending over to put on socks, tights and shoes.

Talking on the telephone

Rushing to answer the telephone before someone hangs up or finding that you have to stand to talk can make breathlessness worse. Try to make sure that your family, friends or work colleagues know that it can take some time for you to answer the phone. Ask them to let the phone ring for a longer time so that you do not have to rush to it. Try to make sure that you are sitting down comfortably before you pick up the phone and take a moment to 'catch your breath' before starting your conversation.

If you find you become breathless whilst talking on the phone or in conversation, try to talk in short sentences. Pause after each sentence rather talking quickly and for a long time before taking a breath. This will prevent breathlessness.

Showering and bathing

Many people find showering, bathing and dressing particularly exhausting. Bathrooms can make you feel claustrophobic and this increases breathlessness. When the weather allows, having a window slightly open in the bathroom while you bathe may help to reduce feelings of breathlessness.

Here are some ideas that may help to make bathing or taking a shower easier.

- As you undress try to resist the temptation to hold your breath as you pull clothes over your head. Take your arms out of your jumper or shirt first, then quickly slip it over your head. This means that your face is covered as little as possible and you don't have to raise your arms for too long.
- Not filling the bath too full and not having the water too hot are tips that people describe as ways to minimise feelings of breathlessness.
- Once you are undressed, sit at the side of the bath and slowly lift one leg in at a time (rather than swinging both legs in together).
- If you feel you need to, use the breathing exercises before you lower yourself into the bath. Some people find that sitting in the shower is less tiring.
- Positioning the shower so that the water does not spray directly onto the face can help reduce feelings of breathlessness.
- Let the water out of the bath before you get out. You may find it easier to lift yourself onto your knees first. Give yourself a few moments to rest before you stand.
- While you sit at the side of the bath wrap a large towel around yourself so that you begin to dry. You will find that this reduces the effort of patting yourself dry later. A toweling dressing gown can do the drying for you instead.
- When you dry yourself, try to remain in a sitting position. Bring your feet up to prevent bending over to dry your feet and legs.
- Rest as frequently as you need.

Remember to use lower chest breathing.

Gardening

Being breathless can make gardening difficult for many reasons. Problems range from continually bending down, which will bring on attacks of breathlessness, to not being able to get up after sitting to plant bulbs or to weed. A low garden chair placed alongside borders or flowerbeds may help you to weed or prune without having to bend over and will make it more comfortable for you to rest if you feel you need to.

If you find that none of these positions is helpful, you may decide to plant flowers in pots or trays that can be positioned at waist level when working at them. Just do a little at a time so that you don't become exhausted. Remember to use lower chest breathing during activities such as gardening. You will find that you can do more before becoming breathless.

Planning your activities

Planning your daily activities can help you to identify and achieve those things that you want to do.

It may help you to think of your breathing capacity as a bank balance with each activity having its own breathing cost. The aim is to stay in credit, finding a new balance between being active and being short of breath.

Over-exerting yourself may put you in debt, either by causing you breathlessness or making you very tired the next day. You need to learn the cost to you of different activities so that you can learn to stay 'in credit' with your energy level and manage your breathing.

Adjusting to this new balance may be difficult for you. You may feel angry or frustrated at having to adapt your lifestyle in so many ways. These emotions can make your shortness of breath worse and it may help you to talk about them if you feel able.

Pacing your activities

It is important to pace your activities, and to rest between jobs. Letting others do some daily chores from time to time can allow you to carry out pursuits you find more satisfying and rewarding. Planning and pacing your activities may help you feel able to go out and see friends and family.

It may be that you first need to find out by trial and error what you can comfortably do. You may even feel that being short of breath for a short period is acceptable for achievement of having been able to carry out a specific activity. Planning the day and discussing what you feel able to do on a day-to-day basis may prove helpful both for you and those close to you.

Try talking to a relative or nurse about any aspects of an activity that worry you. By talking you may find that certain activities become easier to manage.

Feeling tired

The feeling of tiredness or having no energy is something that many people talk about as being especially difficult to cope with. Feeling that you need to rest at several points throughout the day is perfectly normal so allow yourself as much rest as you need. It is important to try to balance periods of rest with some gentle exercise as prolonged rest can result in a rapid drain of energy that can lead to feelings of overwhelming tiredness.

People talk about 'testing themselves', saying 'I have to try, but if I can't do it I don't do it again'. This may be the best way of measuring for yourself what is a manageable amount of activity. Some people have a time during the day when they feel particularly tired or breathless. Avoid activity at this time. Enjoy a book, the television or a nap instead.

Thinking ahead

Being prepared for the unexpected, such as a flight of stairs or having to stand in a long queue can allow you to have the confidence to socialise or go to work.

By working out tactics for coping with situations you know to be difficult or which make you panicky, you will find that they become easier to manage. For example, carry only essentials in your briefcase or bag, especially if you have to climb stairs. If you are going to surrounding that are usually crowded or hectic allow yourself plenty of time and try to take your time while you are there.

Things to look forward to

You may want to plan a holiday or trip, take up or re-start a hobby or interest. The important thing is to plan ahead.

- Identify exactly what it is you want to do

- Prepare for it by thinking about what it will involve, and how the techniques you have learnt will help you with any problems you anticipate.
- Talk to your family, friends, doctors or nurses about any concerns that seem especially difficult. They may be able to help you think of various ways around them.

Use of a hand-held fan

Research has shown that a cool draft of air from a hand-held fan can be very helpful in reducing the feeling of breathlessness. (This is further explained in a different leaflet.)

Positions of ease

When breathing is difficult, there are several positions that may help you to get control of your breathing with minimum effort. These positions are called positions of ease, and are positions that allow the diaphragm (the main muscle of breathing) to be offloaded, and therefore work more efficiently. (These are further explained in a different leaflet.)

The purpose of this booklet is to provide you with advice to help you manage your shortness of breath, minimising its effects upon your life, so that you can look forward to doing activities you enjoy.

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/organisations/west-suffolk-nhs-foundation-trust>



© West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust