



Breathlessness

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness is difficulty in breathing

Breathlessness is the feeling of being out of breath. Being aware of your breathing is a sign of breathlessness and is not normal. Breathlessness is a very distressing symptom and is common in many cancers and other advanced illnesses. Breathlessness may make you feel frightened, anxious and panicky. These emotions are understandable, but unfortunately they make breathlessness worse.

What causes breathlessness?

Different types of cancer as a result of tumour or infection or fluid in the lungs, which restricts the lung's capacity.

- Emphysema
- Chronic asthma
- Heart disease
- A chest infection
- Some psychological illnesses can give rise to breathing difficulties.
- Anaemia
- Pain can make breathing difficult or uncomfortable.

What can be done?

- Explanation as to the cause of breathlessness with support and reassurance will help reduce distress.
- Ensure good ventilation.
- Use light, loose-fitting clothes.
- Sit well propped up in bed, or use a lazy-boy chair or sofa.
- Some patients find it more comfortable to sleep in a chair. Ensure that the feet are raised.
- A cool stream of air, from a fan, and plenty of fresh air and open windows often helps as much as oxygen.
- In the case of a very young patient, use a night light to alleviate fears of being alone.

General medical assistance tips and treatments

- Your Hospice doctor may prescribe small doses of morphine, 5-10 mg four-hourly. Morphine reduces the brain's perception of breathlessness and helps you to be less aware of the breathing.



- Sedatives to relieve anxiety may be taken regularly three times a day. Sedatives calm you and break the anxiety-breathlessness cycle. The combination of low dose morphine and a sedative is more effective than using either measure alone.
- Your doctor may prescribe antibiotics or cortisone or even radiotherapy, depending on the cause of the breathlessness.

What is a nebuliser and would it be of assistance?

- A nebuliser is a small electric-powered machine, which creates a vapour or mist via a face mask to relieve tightness of the chest. Medication can be added to the face mask, e.g. saline or bronchodilator. Cortisone can also be given via this route.

What about oxygen therapy?

- This can be given either continuously or intermittently.
- An oxygen concentrator is preferable for long-term home use. This machine increases the concentration of oxygen by filtering out nitrogen from the surrounding air. An oxygen cylinder would then be advised for use as backup should the electricity be cut off or for travelling.

What about physiotherapy?

- Breathing re-training and relaxation techniques are taught by a physiotherapist.
- Breathing exercises are helpful in managing breathlessness.

Other alternatives

- Aromatherapy is a good alternative to consider.

Is there counselling to address fears and emotional difficulties?

- Hospice provides a counselling service to both the patient and the person caring for the patient, to help manage the associated fear, anxiety or depression often associated with breathlessness.

Remember

Breathlessness places great demands on a patient who expends a huge amount of energy just concentrating on breathing. It is important for a care giver to be there or the patient at all times, listening, anticipating their needs and providing reassurance and company. The care givers should remain as calm as possible because showing panicky feelings or anxiety will only worsen the patient's distress.

How can I cope with everyday activities?

Setting priorities



Your breathlessness may mean you can no longer do everything you want to. You may need to set priorities. Think about what you want to do, and what you need to do. Decide what is really important to you and concentrate on doing it. Don't worry about the rest. Your priorities may change from day-to-day.

Planning your activities

- Planning ahead may help to stop you getting too tired or breathless.
- Don't take on too much in any one day.
- You may feel more active at certain times of the day. Use these times to do more active things.
- Pace yourself and balance your activities with time for rest. When you are travelling to an appointment, allow yourself extra time to get there.
- When you plan an activity, it may help to build in a rest period (for example, time for coffee break during a shopping trip).

Getting out of bed

- Take your time. It may help to sit on the edge of the bed for a few minutes before you carry on.

Washing and dressing

- Loose clothes are easier to put on, and will not restrict your breathing.
- When washing and dressing, it may be easier if you sit down.
- Have all your clothes close by, ready to put on.
- When you take a bath or shower, don't have the water too hot. The room can get steamy, which makes breathing harder.
- Have something ready to sit on when you get out of the bath or shower.
- A small hand rail in the shower or bath may help. Other equipment is available if bathing becomes too difficult.

Bending and stretching

- Avoid bending and stretching if you can. Keep the things you use most often within easy reach.
- Try sitting on a stool to reach things near floor level, such as plug sockets.
- Avoid bending over at the waist. This makes breathing harder. Instead, bend your knees and keep your back straight. This lets you keep your shoulders back and your chest upright.
- When bending, have something secure to hold onto (e.g. a chair) for when you stand up again.

Climbing gentle slopes and stairs

- Try to match the rate of your breathing with your walking pace. Breathe in on one step, and out on the next two steps. You may need to practise this for a while to get it right.



- Try not to make too many trips up and down the stairs.

Lifting

Don't carry heavy bags with your arms by your side. Use a shopping trolley or a backpack instead.

Shopping

- Make a list of what you need, before you set out.
- Try to shop at less busy times.
- Use a shopping trolley instead of carrying baskets.
- Go shopping with a friend, so they can help you if you get tired.
- Ask staff to help you pack your shopping bags and carry them to your car.
- You could try a different way of shopping—if you have a computer, for instance, you may be able to order on the Internet and have your goods delivered to you.

What breathing exercises can I try?

First, find a comfortable position. You may feel better if you sit down, or are propped up in bed. Do whatever feels best.

When you are comfortable, try to breathe in slowly through your nose, and out gently through your mouth or pursed lips.

When you breathe out, it should take twice as long as when you breathe in.

Now, keep your shoulders and upper chest as relaxed as you can while you do the following exercises:

Exercise 1

Put your hands on either side of your chest.

Breathe out through your mouth. As you do this, feel your ribs sinking as far as possible.

Breathe in through your nose or mouth. Feel your ribs expand, then gently breathe out again.

Repeat this exercise six times, if you can.

Exercise 2

Try to relax the top of your chest and shoulders.

Breathe out gently. Feel your lower ribs move down and in.

Breathe in. Feel your ribs expand and your stomach rise.

Repeat this exercise six times, if you can.



Practise the exercises every so often, until you can do them almost without thinking. Doing these exercises regularly (every couple of hours or so) may help to ease your breathlessness.

What relaxation exercises can I try?

If you feel anxious, your muscles will tense. This can make breathlessness worse.

Here are some simple exercises to help you relax.

In these exercises, you will concentrate on different parts of the body in turn. You will tense and relax different sets of muscles. Think about how different your muscles feel when they are relaxed.

Sit in a comfortable chair, or propped up in bed, with your shoulders and head supported. Close your eyes, and breathe slowly and steadily.

Hands

Make a fist with each hand for a few seconds. Squeeze, relax and repeat.

Arms

Bend your arms

Shoulders

Raise your shoulders as high as you can. Relax, and drop your shoulders. Repeat.

Neck

Push your head back against your chair or bed. Relax and repeat.

Face

Frown, with eyes closed. Hold for a few seconds, then relax.

Mouth

Clench your teeth, push your tongue against the roof of your mouth, hold, relax and repeat.

Stomach

Pull in your stomach. Hold, relax and repeat.

Legs

Point your toes and stretch your legs. Hold, relax and repeat.