

# Help with breathlessness

**This factsheet is for guidance only and has been produced with assistance from healthcare professionals**

Breathlessness is the feeling of being out of breath. During advanced illnesses, breathlessness can occur at a much lower level of physical exertion than normally expected; even crossing a room slowly can be a struggle. Living with long term breathlessness can be an emotional and physical challenge.

## **Breathing methods and positions to ease breathlessness**

This information sheet outlines several techniques and positions. Members of the team will help you to identify those which are most likely to be helpful to you.

## **Muscles involved in breathing**

### **The diaphragm**

The main muscle of breathing is the diaphragm. This is a large flat sheet of muscle between your chest and abdomen. As you breathe in, it moves down to help draw air into your lungs, pushing your tummy forward as it moves. When you breathe out it relaxes and returns to its natural dome shape. The diaphragm muscle does not tire easily and therefore can move up and down all day, every day without getting tired.

### **The accessory breathing muscles**

There are many muscles around your neck and shoulders which normally allow you to move your neck and arms. However, when you are breathless these muscles can pull on your upper ribs to help you draw air into your lungs. These muscles are therefore called accessory breathing muscles (helpers).

These helpers are not designed to be used for long periods. They require extra energy and effort to use, and fatigue far quicker than the diaphragm. When used unnecessarily, these muscles can unhelpfully focus the breathing to the upper chest, making the breathing pattern inefficient. With prolonged overuse they may become tight, stiff and sore.

It is normal to use your breathing accessory muscles when breathless but also important to learn to relax

and 'switch them off' once the acute episode has passed. Try to focus your breathing movement on your tummy (diaphragm) as much as possible and keep your accessory breathing muscles in 'reserve'. Is breathlessness harming me? Is there anything I can do to stop myself feeling frightened?

## **Pursed lips breathing**

Some people find narrowing their mouth slightly as they breathe out makes their breathing feel easier. This is called pursed lips breathing. It helps by creating a backpressure that supports your airways open, allowing air to leave your lungs more easily. When practicing pursed lips breathing narrow your mouth gradually until you feel your breathing become a little easier.

## **Breathing control (or relaxed tummy breathing)**

When you feel short of breath, you may find that you do one or a number of the following:

- Use your shoulders and upper chest to help you breathe
- Increase your rate of breathing
- Take smaller shallow breaths
- Have feelings of fear, anxiety, panic or general unrest.

Although these are natural responses they can make your breathlessness feel more difficult. Breathing control may help you recover more quickly from breathlessness associated with activity or feeling panicky. You may wish to use this breathing method with a hand held fan and a position to ease breathlessness.

The aim of this technique is to help steady and pace your breathing, making it as efficient as possible. It focuses on breathing from your diaphragm. It guides you to take in only the air that you need, to avoid unnecessary effort and to relax and calm your breathing.

- When you feel ready, blow out for longer.
- Once your breathing has eased come up straight.

- Find a comfortable and well supported position, such as sitting.
- Allow your shoulders, arms and upper chest to relax.
- By relaxing your upper chest, the effort of breathing is reduced and you use less oxygen.
- Place your hand on your tummy, just below your ribs.
- As you breathe in your hand should rise a little, as you breathe out it should fall.
- Try to feel the expansion of the lower ribs and upper stomach as air comes in.
- This will give you a feeling of breathing around the waist.
- Breathe in through your nose or mouth. The breath out should not require any effort.
- Rest and wait for the next breath to come.

Try to practise every day so that you become used to how it feels, then use it when you notice your breathlessness coming on. Breathe gently when practising; there should only be a slight movement of your tummy at rest.

### Forward lean positions

Forward lean positions fix the shoulders to anchor the accessory breathing muscles, allowing them to pull on your ribs to help draw the air in. Leaning forward may also improve the movement of your diaphragm.

Use a forward lean position to help you recover from breathlessness after activity. When using these positions, try to keep your back straight but let your head drop so your neck is relaxed. Also try to relax your wrists.



### Recovery breathing method

The recovery breathing method encourages you to allow time for the air to leave your lungs as you breathe out, therefore creating more room for the next breath in. The aim of recovery breathing is to calm your breathing until you can breathe smoothly and quietly from your tummy.

Use with a forward lean position to help you recover from breathlessness after activity.

- Take up a forward lean position.
- Use your hand held fan.
- Focusing on the out breath, blow onto the fan.
- Don't worry about the in breath; it will take care of itself.
- As you breathe out narrow your mouth slightly (pursed lips), if it helps.
- Relax your shoulders and upper chest
- Bring your breathing back to your tummy.
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving.

### Rectangle breathing and feather breathing

These techniques help to calm your thoughts and your breathing when you are feeling breathless and anxious. They help you to focus on something outside of your body, rather than worrying about your breathing.

#### Rectangle breathing method

- Find something rectangle shaped to look at
- Examples include: a picture, a window and the television
- Look at the left bottom corner and breathe in
- Then breathe out letting your eyes follow the top edge of the rectangle
- At the next corner breathe in again
- Breathe out following the edge of the rectangle with your eye

## Feather breathing technique

- Keep going until you feel calmer and your breathing feels more in control again
- Breathe round a rectangle
- This is just one of many ways you can complete the rectangle breathing technique. Please seek advice from your therapist for alternative ways of completing it.

Imagine blowing gently, really gently, as if you are gradually blowing, a feather across a table away from you. Again and again and again, in one gentle outward breath. Repeat until you feel calmer.

## What else can I do to help my breathlessness?

### Cool air

Cooling your face can reduce the feeling of breathlessness. Ordinarily this can be achieved with a small hand held fan. However, In line with COVID 19 restrictions it is advised that the use of the hand held fan is not recommended as there is a potential risk of spreading infection to others. Alternative ways can be implemented by opening a window or cooling the face with a misting spray or cold flannel.

## Are there any drugs that will help my breathlessness?

- Morphine; we usually think of morphine as a drug to treat pain, but in smaller doses it can be very helpful for breathlessness.
- Breathlessness can exacerbate anxiety. Sedative drugs may help to relieve acute episodes of anxiety and panic. Lorazepam tablets placed under the tongue can be helpful.

- Low dose antidepressants (mirtazapine and sertraline) can help to reduce anxiety and may modify the brains response to long term breathlessness.
- Steroids (prednisolone or dexamethasone) can help reduce inflammation in the airways of the lungs and hence reduce breathlessness.

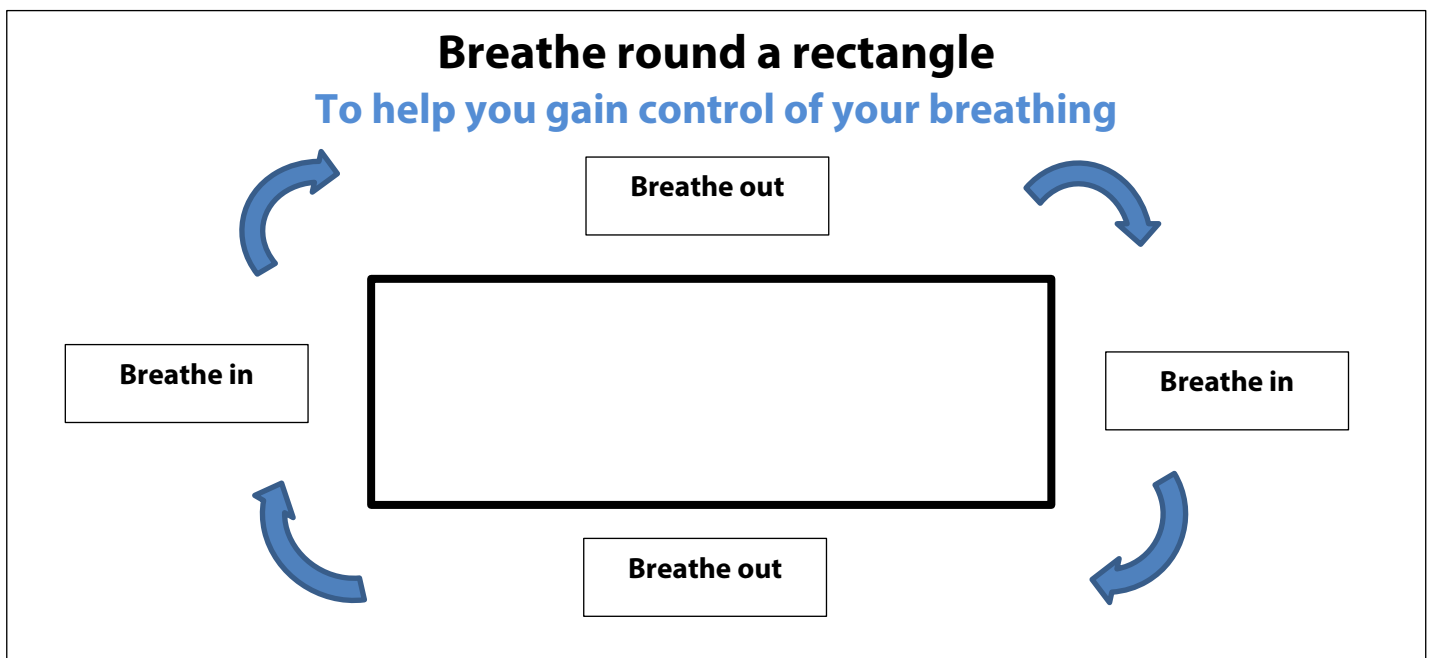
Nebulised saline; a nebuliser is a small machine that turns liquid medication into a fine mist, so that you can breathe it deep into your lungs. Sterile salt water (saline) can be used via a nebuliser to loosen sticky phlegm.

## Will oxygen help me?

Oxygen may help breathlessness in some people, but it does not help everyone and in some patients can even be harmful. Using a fan or sitting by an open window with cool air blowing on to your face may give the same benefit. Your doctor will let you know if oxygen therapy may help you. If you only need oxygen for short periods of time, an oxygen cylinder may be recommended. This is a storage tank containing oxygen for you to breathe. If you need oxygen for longer periods of time, you may have an oxygen concentrator. This is a larger machine that takes and filters oxygen from the surrounding air to supply to you.

## What other treatments might help me?

Complimentary therapies that help you to relax may be useful for managing your breathlessness. Therapies such as acupuncture, aromatherapy and massage may be helpful.



## General advice

- Avoid breath holding during activities such as climbing stairs or bending
- 'Blow as you go', breathe out on effort, blowing out when bending, lifting, reaching or standing up from the chair
- Avoid rushing. Breathless patients sometimes rush as they mistakenly believe if they move more quickly they will be less breathless when they get there
- Paced breathing; take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs



## Resting positions

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

Make sure you are fully over on your side.

Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.

Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.



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### Alternative language copies available

If you would like this information in another language or format, please contact the Patient Experience Lead PA on (0116) 231 8435

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