



Coping with breathlessness

Strategies that may help

*because
you matter*

St Nicholas
Hospice Care

A Registered Charity No. 287773

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Breathlessness can occur for a variety of reasons, can be very distressing and may interfere with many aspects of everyday life.

A natural reaction to breathlessness is to breath more rapidly and to use the upper chest and shoulders to help us breathe in. As well as a physical reaction there is often an emotional response of feeling anxious, panicky and out of control.

There are some simple strategies that may relieve your breathlessness and allow you to feel more in control. You may have already found some strategies that work for you.



Best positions that help

Relaxed sitting: Sit back on a chair with your arms relaxed and hands resting comfortably on your thighs.

Sitting at a table: Place one or two pillows on a table, sit in a chair and lean forward at the hips, supporting your head and upper chest on a pillow.



Sitting leaning forward: Sit on a chair and lean forward with your arms resting on your thighs and your wrists relaxed.



Lean forward: With arms/hands resting on a static object at around waist or hip height such as a window sill, a chair or kitchen work top.



Lean backward: Relax your shoulders and lean back against a wall with your arms relaxed and resting by your sides.

Use pillows: Support yourself when lying on your back or side with pillows.



Handheld fan

The sensation of air from the fan (or an open window) around the cheeks, nose and mouth has been proven to help reduce breathlessness.

You can use the fan for as long as you need. You can use it alongside oxygen.

- Adopt a comfortable position.
- Hold the fan 15cm/6” away from your face.
- Aim the draught of the air towards your face and move it slowly from side to side so the draught touches your mouth, nose and cheeks.
- Keep the fan with you or have several around your home, fans with three blades are preferable and rechargeable models are available.



Pursed lip breathing

This involves breathing in through the nose and then gently out through pursed, narrowed lips as if flickering a candle flame, not blowing it out. If breathing in through your nose is too difficult then concentrating on breathing out through pursed lips can still help.

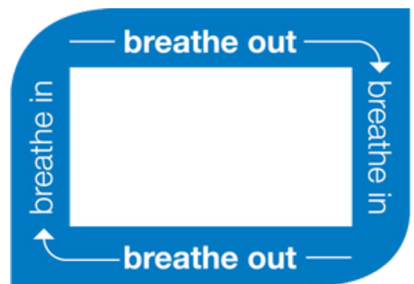
Pursed lip breathing can be used to ease breathlessness during or after activity. This method of breathing supports the airways and may be particularly useful for people with obstructive conditions such as COPD, Emphysema or Asthma.

Breathing rectangle

Use the breathing rectangle below to try and help you regain control of your breathing. Imagine a rectangle or 'breathe around' anything rectangular in your home such as pictures, plug sockets, windows or rugs.

Technique

Starting at the top left corner, breathe out as you look along the top line, pause, then breathe in as you follow the line down. Pause, and then repeat as you go around the rectangle.





Breathing control

This is a method of relieving breathlessness through practising a more normal and efficient breathing pattern.

Practice for short periods of time using your own breathing rate. As you gain control, try to slow the rate down.

Technique

Follow the four points below if you are feeling anxious and to help manage everyday activities such as dressing, climbing stairs or bathing.

1. Settle in a relaxed position with your back supported.
2. Keeping chest and shoulders relaxed, place your hand on your lower rib/upper abdomen.
3. Breathe in gently through your nose feeling the lower chest expand.
4. Breathe out through your mouth.

Recovery Breathing

If you are feeling particularly breathless or panicky Recovery Breathing may help.

The three Fs of Recovery Breathing (For COPD or Asthma)

- Fan - Use a handheld fan to cool the air around your face
- Forward - Adopt a forward lean position
- Focus - Focus on longer breaths out, through pursed lips is possible

The three Fs of Recovery Breathing (For other conditions)

- Fan - Use a hand held fan to cool the air around your face
- Flop - Relax and drop your shoulders
- Focus - Focus on relaxed breaths out



The five P's rule



- **Plan ahead:** Think through your daily activities. Plan what you need to do and when, giving yourself plenty of time to achieve each task.



- **Prioritise:** Accept help when it's offered. Conserve your energy for specific activities that you enjoy. Don't waste energy on chores/tasks that others can do.



- **Pace yourself:** Alternate activity with rest.



- **Positioning:** Different positions can save you energy and reduce breathlessness. Could you do your activities in an easier way? For example, sitting down to chop vegetables.



- **Permission:** Give yourself permission to do things differently and to say no. It is ok to ask for help and rest when needed.

Acupressure/acupuncture

You may be offered acupuncture by your physiotherapist but acupressure can be self-administered or given by a carer. It works on the same principal of alleviating symptoms using pressure points, but hands and fingers are used in place of acupuncture needles.

There are several points that can be used in the treatment of breathlessness. These will be taught to you by a member of staff.

Doing it yourself

Gently stroking down the lung meridian (as illustrated below) on either side of the body can be very useful in an episode of acute breathlessness. Always start at the shoulder end coming off the thumb.

Also, gentle stroking across the upper back can help reduce anxiety and breathlessness.



The lung meridian

Adjustments at home

Aids and adaptations

Breathlessness can be made worse by many simple activities around the house. This can be relieved by using appropriate aids and appliances such as bath aids, perching stools, walking aids and a 'helping hand' tool to avoid bending.

Relaxation

It can be beneficial to find a relaxation technique that works for you. This could include a number of things that, when combined with breathing control, will help you to feel less anxious and more in control. Here are a few suggestions that you might consider trying:

- A relaxation tape, YouTube, CD or MP3 which combines voiceover and music to help focus your relaxation.
- Listen to music which you find relaxing. Some people prefer classical music whereas others might choose folk. Put your favourite 'chill out' tunes on and relax.
- Concentrate on a favourite object such as a painting, photo or piece of art.
- Imagine you are in your favourite place.

Nutrition and hydration

It is important to maintain good nutrition to maintain energy levels and hydration to keep any secretions such as mucus loose and easier to remove from the lungs.

Use your hands

If in doubt, use the calming hand image below and refer to it whenever you feel breathless.



Hospice **Advice line**

Call our 24/7 advice line for health care professionals and families if you need support with symptom management and end-of-life care.

enquiries@stnh.org.uk

www.stnicholashospice.org.uk

01284 766133

Your Experience **Survey**

We want to develop our services in response to feedback; please consider filling out our survey which is available online or can be requested in paper form.

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