

# Managing your breathlessness





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This leaflet provides information about breathlessness and advice on how to manage with it. The techniques described do not replace your usual medicines or personal advice from a healthcare professional. If your breathing suddenly gets worse, please contact your GP. Go to the nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department if your GP cannot see you straight away.

We know that breathlessness can have a big impact on your life. This booklet offers advice to help you manage and understand your breathlessness.

## What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness, or shortness of breath, is an uncomfortable feeling of being out of breath. Breathlessness can be caused by your illness. Even if you're having the best treatment for your illness, you may still feel breathless. Breathlessness that persists for more than 3 months is called chronic breathlessness.

Breathlessness is different for everyone. Some people have breathlessness all the time. Other people have episodes of breathlessness that last for a short period. These episodes may be caused by activity or feeling anxious, or they might happen without any obvious reason.

## Managing your breathlessness

Breathlessness can be uncomfortable and distressing, but there are lots of things you can do to make your breathing easier.

Here are some techniques that can be used to help you control your breathing. Practising these techniques will reduce the sensation of breathlessness.

Please adapt the techniques so you feel comfortable when doing them.

### Tips to help you

- Knowing there are things you can do when you feel breathless can help you feel more in control.
- Try to practise these breathing techniques for the first time when you are not too breathless. This will make them easier to do when you are feeling breathless.

- Ask someone to read the instructions to you the first time you practise them.
- Try to remember to practise these breathing techniques as often as possible. It will take you time to get used to doing them.
- Try not to force the exercises or expect instant results. Aim for a slow change from breathlessness to calmer breathing.
- Set aside time during the day to practise.

## Relaxation

Feelings of anxiety and panic are common when you have a serious illness. These are natural reactions, but they can cause you to have fast and shallow breathing. This can make you feel breathless, which can make you more anxious.

Learning and practising relaxation and breathing techniques can help you to control your anxiety and breathe more easily.

Find out more on our 'Guided relaxation and mindfulness for patients' web page. To access the page, scan the QR code (on the right) with your smartphone or tablet.



Or visit our website [www.rbht.nhs.uk](http://www.rbht.nhs.uk) and search for 'Guided relaxation and mindfulness for patients'.

## Box breathing

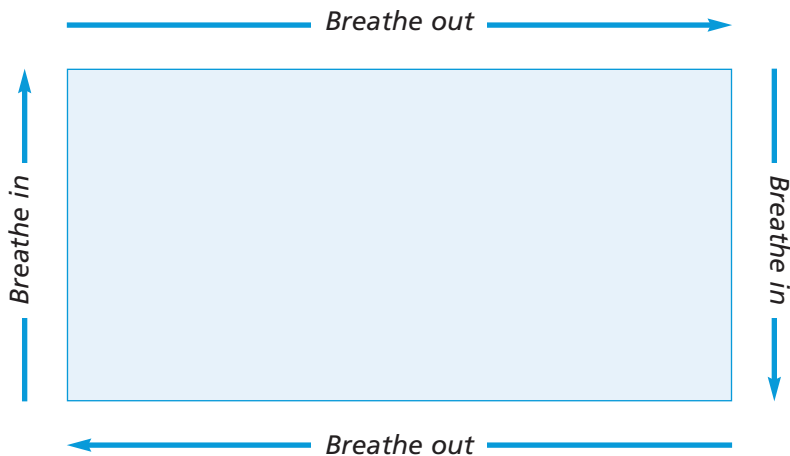
Box breathing is a technique for deeper breathing. It will help you to manage your breathlessness.

The aim is to move from fast, upper chest breathing to relaxed, slow tummy breathing. Deeper breathing will help you to relax. This will help your breathlessness.

## How to practise box breathing

1. Place one hand gently on your stomach. You should feel your stomach rise and fall with each breath in and out.
2. Take slower breaths, in through your nose down into your tummy. Then gently breathe out through pursed lips as if you are going to blow out a candle. Do not force your lungs to empty.
3. Try counting 1,2,3,4 as you breathe in and out.
4. Look at the picture below or a picture on screen. Focus on one corner as you breathe in and count to 4.
5. Then breathe out counting to 4 as your eye moves along the rectangle to the next corner.

You should carry on doing this box breathing exercise until you feel less breathless.





## Tips to help you when box breathing

- Relax your shoulders and neck muscles and try not to hold your tummy in.
- Let your hands and arms feel loose or heavy as you breathe out.
- Do this exercise for 2 or 3 seconds rather than 4 seconds to start with. You can then work up to doing it for 4 seconds.

## Pursed lip breathing

Pursed lip breathing is a simple and safe way to get more air into your lungs. Purled lip breathing keeps your airway open longer, so more air moves in and out.

### How to do pursed lip breathing

1. Get into a comfortable position for your breathing.
2. Breathe in gently through your nose.
3. Purse your lips as if you are about to blow out a candle.
4. Blow out with your lips pursed when you breathe out.
5. Do this gently for as long as it feels comfortable.
6. Don't force the air out of your lungs.

## Positions to help breathlessness

When you feel breathless, find a position that helps you relax.

Talk to your nurse or physiotherapist about positions to help you.

## Sitting, leaning forwards

Sit down and lean forwards, with your arms resting on your legs.

Relax your arms and hands.



## Sitting upright

Sit up straight against the back of a chair.

Rest your arms on your legs, or on the chair arms.

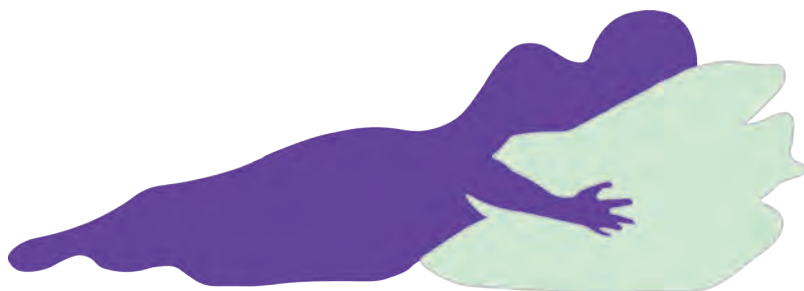
Relax your arms and hands.



## High side lying

Lie on your side, with 2 to 3 pillows under your head and shoulders, for support.

Bend both legs, or just your top leg, depending on what is comfortable for you.



## Standing, leaning forwards

Find something to lean on for support. For example, you could lean on a chair, wall, rail or windowsill.

You could also lean on a walking stick, a walking frame or a long umbrella.

Lean forwards and rest your arms on the chair, or other object you have to lean on.





## Standing, leaning backwards or sideways

Stand about 30cms (12ins) away from a wall, with your feet slightly apart.

Lean backwards or sideways against the wall, and let your arms hang loosely.

Rest your hands by your side, or rest them in your pockets, or on a belt or waistband.



## Fan therapy

Research shows that cooling your face with a handheld fan is a simple way of easing breathlessness. Many people usually notice a difference within a few minutes.

Carry a 3-blade handheld fan with you to use whenever you need it. You can keep a fan by your bed to use at night too. These fans are small and light, and easily fit into a handbag or pocket. Using floor-standing fan or desktop fan can also be helpful.

### Tips when using a fan

- Get into a comfortable position.
- Hold the fan about 15cm (6ins) away from your face.

- Let the cool air blow towards your nose and mouth. Move the fan from side to side to cool your cheeks too.
- Try sitting in front of an open window with the cool air blowing over your face.
- Try putting a cool damp flannel on your face. Then take it off and use the fan. Using a damp flannel can help to make your face feel cooler when you switch on the fan.



The picture above shows a 3-blade fan

## Medicines and other help for breathlessness

There are different medicines and treatments that may help with breathlessness. You can talk to your GP, cancer doctor or specialist nurse at the hospital.

### Opioids

Opioids are morphine-based medicines that are commonly used to treat moderate to severe pain. In small doses they are also used to treat long-term breathlessness. Opioids have been used as a treatment for breathlessness for many years. They are proven to be effective and safe.

Opioids should make your breathing feel easier and you may also feel more relaxed. Opioids do not work for everyone. If you feel that there is no improvement in your breathing, please speak to a member of your medical team.

## Sedatives

Breathlessness makes some people feel anxious. Sedatives can help relieve anxiety. It is always better to try to learn some relaxation exercises to help with breathlessness, before trying sedatives.

People with anxiety may be prescribed sedatives if other treatments have not helped their breathlessness.

## Tips to manage everyday life

It is good to keep active, but when you are breathless, even normal activities can feel overwhelming.

### The 4 Ps

Try following the 4 P rules: **prioritise**, **plan**, **pace** and **permission**.

#### Prioritise

Save your energy for the things that need to be done most or are most important to you. Before doing a task, think about whether you need to do it now. If it is not necessary, consider doing it at another time.

If it is a more active task, ask family or friends to help if you can. Do everything the easiest way possible. Give yourself extra time to do things, so you are not rushed or stressed. This should make you less likely to get breathless.

#### Plan

This is a good way to make the most of the energy you have. Spread your tasks throughout the week rather than doing them all in one day.

Each day think about how you'll spread your activities throughout the day. This will help you to avoid becoming breathless as quickly when doing activities. It will also give you time to recover after doing each task.



## Pace

Many people find it hard to slow down when they used to moving at a faster pace. Try to take time when you're doing activities. Listen to your body and try to understand your limits.

## Permission

Give yourself permission to do things differently from before. This might mean taking rests between activities or asking for help with something you used to do by yourself.

Even if you plan ahead, you won't always have enough energy to do things you want to do. Be kind to yourself and try not to worry if you don't get through all your activities in a day.

## Around your home

Think about ways to arrange your home to make tasks easier. Here are some things you may want to consider:

- Put a chair in a hallway or landing, so you can rest when walking between rooms.
- Sit down to do tasks like washing, dressing or preparing food.
- Arrange your kitchen so the things you use most often are at waist height. This means you do not have to bend or stretch to reach cupboards.
- Try to avoid bending from the waist down, as this can restrict your breathing. Instead, try bending your knees, while keeping your back straight. This keeps your chest upright and your shoulders back.
- When you bend down, you may find it helps to hold on to a secure piece of furniture.
- Some people find it helpful to use a grabbing stick or reacher (pick-up stick).

- Try not to lift heavy items, as this can make you tired and short of breath.
- Laundry or shopping is easier to push in a trolley.
- You may feel less breathless if you lean on the trolley handle while you are walking.
- Some people find they can walk further and feel less breathless when using a wheeled walking frame or walker. Some wheeled walkers come with baskets to carry things. A 4-wheeled walker may also have a seat so you can sit and rest.

## Going out

If you are planning a day out somewhere, look up some information about it before you go. Find out about lifts, parking, transport links, and how far you will have to walk.

The air may be drier if there is air conditioning or if it is a cold, dry day. This can make your mouth dry or make you cough. Taking a small bottle of water with you can help. You could also keep a handheld fan with you to help if you get breathless.


Some people find that when the air is cold outside, it can help to put a light scarf across their nose and mouth. This warms the air they breathe and adds moisture to it.

When you are walking outside, go slowly.

It may help to match your breathing to your steps. You can do this by:

- breathing in on 1 step
- breathing out on the next 2 steps.

A walking stick, walking frame, wheeled walkers or wheelchair can be useful when you are outside, particularly for longer trips.



Your local shopping centre or supermarket may also have wheelchairs you can borrow while you are there.

## Diet

You may find that breathlessness can cause problems with eating. If you are not managing to eat enough, you can add calories to your food with high-protein powders. You can also try adding nutritious, high-calorie drinks. They are available from most pharmacies.

### Tips to help you eat more easily

- Sit up at a table to eat if you can. Your breathing may feel less restricted.
- Eat smaller meals and serve them on a smaller plate.
- Eat slowly and take smaller mouthfuls.
- Try to avoid chewy foods.
- Add sauces or gravies to make food easier to eat.
- Take sips of fluid often. This helps keep your mouth moist. It also helps stop phlegm (mucus) getting sticky, which makes it easier to cough up.
- Drink at least 1½ litres (3 pints) of fluid a day unless you have been told to restrict your fluid intake.
- On days when making food feels too difficult, ready meals can help.

## Physical activity

Physical activity can improve your breathing. It helps you be as fit as possible and can make you feel better. Even people with severe breathing problems can benefit from small amounts of physical activity.

Physical activity will not necessarily make you more breathless, especially if you go slowly and practise breathing techniques.

By slowly doing more activity, you will get fitter and your muscles will get stronger. You may get breathless, but over time you will be able to do more before you become breathless. You will also be more confident in your ability to control your breathing. You will also know when and how to do it. It can help to remember that your breathlessness will usually go away after a few minutes.


There may be an opportunity to join a local pulmonary rehabilitation group in your area. Please speak with your GP or respiratory team to find out more information.

## Sex and breathlessness

You may be worried about how being breathless can affect your sex life. If you have a partner, they may also be thinking about this. Sex takes energy and is tiring for the heart and lungs. It is important to recognise this and make some changes.

### Tips to help your sex life

- Be open with your partner about your worries and what might help. This can help you both enjoy a fulfilling sex life.
- Talking, hugging and touching are all important parts of intimacy that do not take too much energy.
- Try to have sex when you are feeling rested, and your breathing is at its best.
- You might find it easier to have sex at a certain time of day, such as early evening rather than late at night.
- Some positions use less energy. You may need to try different positions to find what suits you best. The charity Asthma and Lung UK has illustrations of suggested sexual positions for people with breathlessness. See website details on page 17.

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- Make sure you are as relaxed as possible and take things slowly.
  - A cooler room may help your breathing to feel easier.
  - Sex after a big meal or alcohol might be more difficult, as your stomach will be full. Alcohol can also affect your sexual function.
  - If you have oxygen at home, it may be helpful to use it before, during and after sexual activity.
  - If you feel breathless while having sex, stop and take a few deep, slow breaths from your lower chest. Do this rather than completely stopping.
  - Speak to your GP or specialist nurse if you want more advice.

## Breathlessness diary

You may find there are certain times of the day when you need more energy, such as in the morning when you are getting dressed. Or you may find there are certain things that make your breathlessness worse, such as feeling stressed.

It can help to write down:

- when your breathlessness is difficult
- activities that make it worse
- times of day that you have more energy
- what techniques you use to deal with it

You can also use a diary to plan activities for times of the day when you feel better. And it can remind you to practise breathing techniques.



## Support and more information

**Asthma + Lung UK**

Web: [www.asthmaandlung.org.uk](http://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk)



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If you have concerns about any aspect of the service you have received in hospital and feel unable to talk to those people responsible for your care, call the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on:

- Royal Brompton Hospital – 020 7349 7715
- Harefield Hospital – 01895 826 572

You can also email [gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net](mailto:gstt.rbhh-pals@nhs.net). This is a confidential service.



Royal Brompton Hospital  
Sydney Street  
London  
SW3 6NP  
Phone: 0330 12 88121

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UB9 6JH  
Phone: 0330 12 88121

Website: [www.rbht.nhs.uk](http://www.rbht.nhs.uk)

Royal Brompton and Harefield hospitals are part of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust

### **Language and accessible support services**

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please contact the department your appointment is with.

