

Breathlessness and Breathlessness Management



What is Breathlessness?

Breathlessness is a feeling of being unable to catch your breath, or a feeling that you are unable to get enough air into your lungs. It can be a very frightening experience.

It frequently happens after exercising more than your body is used to, but it can also occur while you are resting or after being frightened or startled.

Many people have symptoms of breathlessness, and these symptoms vary greatly from person to person.

What makes you breathless may be very different to what makes another person breathless.



What Causes Breathlessness?

Breathlessness can be caused by lots of different things. It can be caused by a specific disease, most commonly affecting either the heart or the lungs.

These two organs work together to carry oxygen around the body, the lungs bring in oxygen to the bloodstream and the heart pumps the blood around the body to your muscles and other major organs.

Therefore, if there is a problem with either the heart or the lungs, the muscles and other organs may need more oxygen than your body can provide. This may cause you to feel breathless.

Examples of conditions that may cause breathlessness are COPD, Fibrosing Alveolitis, Asthma, Coronary Heart Disease and Heart Failure.

However, it is often the case that people can get breathless without having a heart or a lung condition. It can be caused by not being used to exercise, or fear and anxiety.

Regardless of why you become breathless, there are some simple techniques you can do to help improve and control your breathing.

Being short of breath can be very frightening and it can be difficult to know what to do.

Most importantly DON'T PANIC. Try to remember that your breathlessness will settle.

Breathing Techniques

There are various techniques for coping with breathlessness. Practise these every day when sitting down. As you become familiar with them you can use them to help you when you are feeling breathless.

- All of these should be gentle and not forced
- Never hold your breath
- Use them in the positions described in the next section

1. Breathing Control

This is helpful if you are generally short of breath. Breathing control means breathing gently, using the least amount of effort, with your shoulders supported and relaxed.

In a comfortable position, relax your shoulders, arms, and hands. Breathe in gently through your nose and breathe out through your nose or mouth. Try to feel more relaxed and calmer each time you breathe out. Gradually try and make the breaths slower and deeper as you are able.

Tips for breathing control

Do

- Try to practice for at least 10 minutes a day
- Practice in a comfortable position
- Try to ensure there are no interruptions
- Incorporate breathing control into daily life e.g. walking to car

Don't

- Hold your breath whilst performing breathing control



2. Pursed lip breathing

Breathe out with your lips pursed, as if you are whistling. This slows your breathing down and helps you to make your breathing more efficient.

3. Relaxed slow deep breathing

As you start to exert yourself, try and slow down your breathing and breathe more deeply. Breathe in through your nose and breathe out through your mouth, if possible. It is very useful to try when you are doing something you know will make you out of breath. This combines well with technique 2 and 4.

4. Blow as you go

Breathe out when you are making a big effort, for example:

- Lifting your arms above your head
- Reaching for something on a shelf
- Bending down
- Going up a step
- Standing up
- During the hardest part of any action.

5. Paced breathing

This is useful when climbing stairs (or walking). Breathe in, in time with the steps you take. Do this in a rhythm that suits you and how breathless you feel.

For example:

- Breathe in when you are on the stair and breathe out as you go up the stair (blow as you go).

OR

- Breathe in for one stair and out for one stair

OR

- Breathe in for one stair and out for two.

Positions to Ease Breathlessness

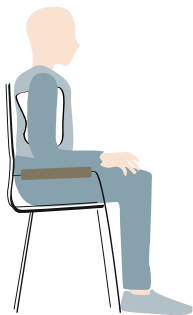
The best positions to use are the ones that need the least energy or effort. If you tense your shoulders and grip onto things when you are breathless, you are wasting energy and oxygen.



Sitting

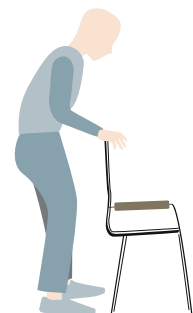
Sitting uses less energy than standing up. Try these positions and see which feels better for you, as not every position suits everybody.

- Lean forward, resting your forearms on your knees, or on the arms of the chair or a table. Try to let go of any tension in your arms and shoulders.
- Sit bolt upright resting back in your chair. Support your arms with pillows under your armpits. Try and let go of any tension in your arms and shoulders.



When you are very short of breath

Rest your head and arms on pillows on a table in front of you or lie on your side in bed propped up with lots of pillows.



Standing

Lean forwards from the hips, with your arms resting on something at the right height (window sills, garden wall, kitchen work tops, back of a chair).

Standing or walking

Put your hands on your hips, in your pockets, or stick your thumbs in your belt loops to support your arms without gripping. If you carry a shoulder bag, rest your arms on it.

Using a walking aid (a walking stick, or a frame with wheels) can help you find one of these comfortable postures when you are out and about.

Most people find pushing a supermarket trolley helpful - it works in the same way.

Try all these positions and decide which ones are best for you. Different ones will suit different people and situations.



Other useful tips:

- Make sure you take all your medicines and inhaler DAILY as prescribed.
- If you feel wheezy or tight chested, try taking your blue inhaler.
- If possible, avoid things that make you wheezy or worsen your breathing e.g. smoke, strong smells, animals, sprays.
- Take your blue inhaler before you go anywhere that you know will make you wheezy.
- If you get very breathless when eating, try softer foods that don't take a lot of chewing. Use sauces and gravy. Eat little and often rather than having large meals. Ask to be referred to a dietician.
- Try and do little and often with regards to activity.
- If you have lots of phlegm on your chest make sure you can clear it effectively. Try the Active Cycle Breathing Technique (ACBT).
- A fan blowing on the side of your face may help. Handheld battery fans can be purchased from lots of shops.



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