

Patient information

Breathlessness

Woodlands Hospice

Breathlessness affects different people in different ways but can be frightening when it happens.

In this leaflet we will give you some simple information about breathlessness to help with your understanding of the condition.

We have included advice on how you can adapt your breathing, along with practical tips and simple exercises. We hope that, with practice, your anxiety will reduce, your confidence in your ability to cope will improve and you will feel calmer.

What to do when you feel very breathless

- Slow down all your movements.
- Lean forwards (e.g. onto a table).
- Don't talk.
- Use a fan or sit by an open window.
- Try to control your breathing with the breathing control technique.
- Listen to music or the TV – distraction helps.

The important thing to remember when breathlessness is making you feel panicky is that you WILL continue to breathe.

Managing Shortness of Breath

How your lungs work:

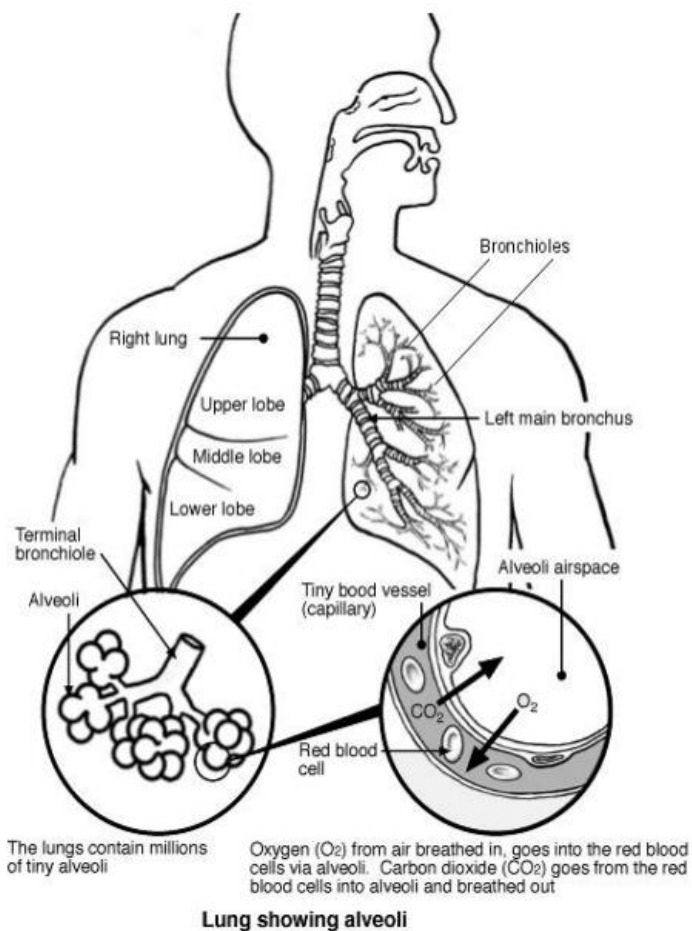
Your lungs are like sponges which bring oxygen into the body and get rid of carbon dioxide into the air. There are two lungs in the chest cavity, one on each side. When you breathe in, the air flows through your nose and mouth and down a 'tree' of 'branching' tubes.

The first tube is the windpipe (trachea) which then branches into two smaller tubes called 'bronchi', one in each lung. These bronchi then divide again and again into smaller airways until the air reaches small sacs at the end called 'alveoli'.

There are millions of these alveoli in each lung and this is where the oxygen we breathe in passes into the blood. This is also where carbon dioxide passes from the blood into the alveoli and travels back throughout the different tubes to our mouth as we breathe out.

Anything that causes narrowing or blocking of these tubes such as sputum, catarrh, COPD (Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease), scarring from radiotherapy or surgery, or tumours can make it feel harder for air to get into the alveoli making it difficult for oxygen to pass into the blood, and for carbon dioxide to pass back out.

Diagram of the lung, showing the alveoli:



How Shortness of Breath May Affect You

- **Feeling frightened, anxious and panicky**

These are your body's normal reactions but can cause you to breathe more rapidly and tense your muscles making breathing even more difficult. Also, faster breathing is harder and gets less breath into the body.

- **You may find that you breathe using your shoulders and upper chest**

A person without any breathing difficulties will use their diaphragm (the muscular 'wall' below the rib cage) and lower chest muscles to breathe.

When we are breathless, we use the upper chest and shoulder muscles to help chest expansion but they get tired very quickly, become more tense and use more oxygen which increases breathlessness even more. You may start to get pain in these muscles.

What you can do to help yourself

1. Positioning:

The following are all positions that allow your diaphragm and tummy to move more easily whilst supporting your shoulders and upper chest – this can make breathing easier. See which of these works for you or perhaps find your own position:

- a) Leaning against a wall with your shoulders relaxed.
- b) Sitting upright in a chair with a supportive back, shoulders relaxed.
- c) Leaning forwards while sitting, leaning on your elbows or on a table.
- d) Leaning forwards while standing with your hands or elbows on a work top or table.

Once you are in a comfortable position, try breathing in through your nose (if possible) and gently out through your mouth. Some people find it helpful to purse the lips when breathing out (as if blowing out a candle).

Try to take longer breathing out than breathing in (count to three as you breathe in – and count to four as you breathe out). This helps keep old air out of your lungs to make room for fresh air. Try to keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed.

2. Breathing Control:

You can try this gentle breathing to help you make the most of your lungs when resting and after activity.

This is how to do it:

- a) Make sure you are sitting comfortably with your back well supported
- b) Place one hand on your tummy just below your rib cage and relax your shoulders.
- c) As you breathe in, feel your hand rising and being pushed out by your diaphragm and tummy muscles, as you breathe out it will sink down and in.
- d) This should give you the feeling of breathing around your waist.
- e) Breathe in through your nose and out gently through your mouth. Count to three as you breathe in (one, two, three) – and count to four as you breathe out (one, two, three, four).
- f) Keep your shoulders and upper chest relaxed.
- g) Practice this a few times each day and when you are not breathless so that you can use it effectively when you are breathless. Repeat five – ten breaths each time.

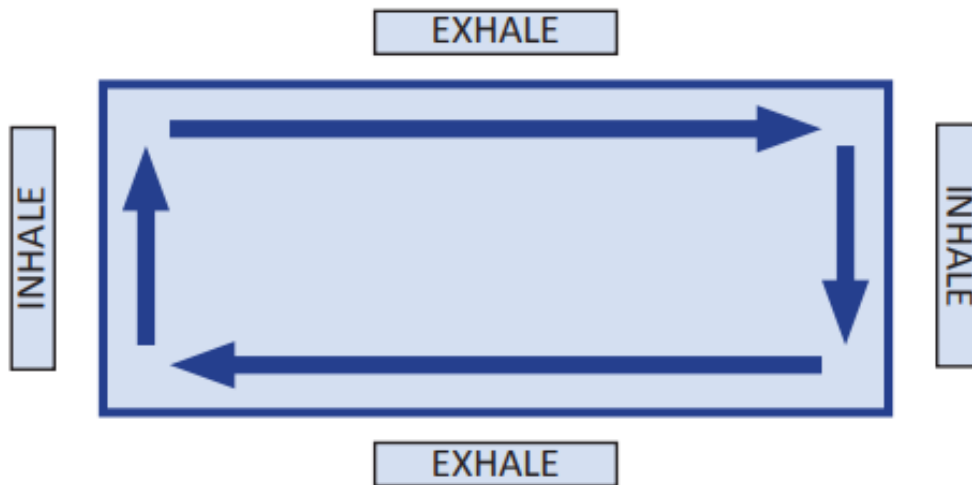
3. Distracting the Mind:

Fix your eyes on a particular object and then close them.
Say “peace, calm, relax” quietly to yourself in your mind.....

Visualise a place, such as a garden, or the sea, that you find relaxing and make a mental note of the objects you would see there, the colours, smells, the sounds you might hear and the temperature.....

Listen and relax to soft, gentle music.....

The Breathing Rectangle

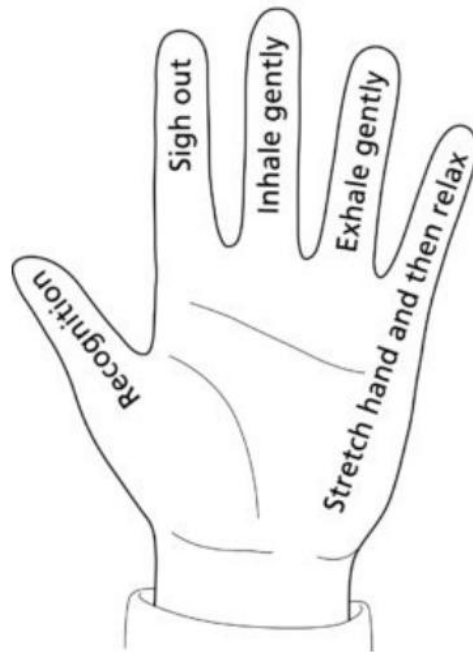


Use the Breathing Rectangle to help you focus your breathing and allow you to get it under control. You can do this technique anywhere – look at the picture, a window, or a TV as your rectangle and follow your breathing around it.

The Calming Hand

The Calming Hand can be used to help ease breathlessness.

Each point is simple and helps you to control and calm your breathing.



How to do it:

1. Recognise – the signs of breathlessness and that they are not sinister. Hold your thumb firmly whilst reminding yourself what to do next. This will help calm your breathing.
2. Sigh out – relax your shoulder and breathe out, stop and drop your shoulders.
3. Inhale – take in a slow and gentle breath, through your nose followed by...
4. Exhale... a gentle breath out. Try and exhale for longer than you inhale.
5. Stretch out your hand, relax and stop – hand stretching is helpful when you feel very breathless or panicky.

Sometimes you may need to complete steps one to five again; sometimes it may take a while to settle. When you have completed the calming hand, try to practice some breathing control.

Practising all of these techniques when you are not especially breathless may help you use them when you are having difficulties. The aim is to get your body and mind used to using these techniques so that they can be used whenever you find them helpful.

4. Handheld Fan:

When you feel breathless you may open a door or window to “get some fresh air”. Using a handheld battery-operated fan can be seen as a “portable breath of fresh air.” It is thought that cooling the cheeks, nose and mouth areas sends a message to the brain and eases breathlessness.

How to do it:

Hold the fan six inches away from your face and aim the draught of air towards your face, moving the fan slowly side to side until your breathing eases.

Other methods that may help include:

- a) A cool flannel or cool water mist spray to the face.
- b) Opening windows.
- c) Table-top or floor standing fans.

5. Comfort Zone:

It may be useful to have an area in your home where you can sit when breathless. Ideally this will have a supportive high-backed chair and pillows with a side table where you can leave a fan, cool drink, music, inhalers, medication and anything else that helps you relax.

6. Pacing Activity:

Planning your daily activities can help you (and those close to you) to identify and achieve the things you want.

Try to think of your breathing capacity as a bank balance with each activity having its own breathing cost. The aim is to stay in credit, finding a new balance between being active and being short of breath. Over-exerting yourself may put you into debt by either causing breathlessness or making you feel tired the next day.

Over time you will learn the ‘cost’ of different activities and how to adjust them so your energy levels stay ‘in credit’ and you are able to manage your breathing better.

Adjusting to this can be difficult. You may feel angry or frustrated at having to adapt your lifestyle... and these emotions can make you feel even more anxious and short of breath. It may help to talk to someone about these feelings.

Plan ahead with activities. For example, when climbing a flight of stairs:

- Only carry the bare essentials.
- Take one step at a time.
- Stop every three steps to pace yourself.

7. Exercise:

It has been shown that gentle exercises can help improve your breathing. Periods of prolonged rest can lead to loss of energy and muscle strength which can make you feel more tired. Speak to your physiotherapist to see if an exercise programme would be beneficial for you.

Feedback

Your feedback is important to us and helps us influence care in the future.

You should be provided with a QR code to fill in a patient satisfaction survey at your convenience Your feedback will be greatly appreciated.

Further information

Telephone 0151 529 2637 Monday to Friday 9:00 to 17:00 and ask to be transferred to a member of the Therapy Team

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