

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



BREATHLESSNESS



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about managing breathlessness.

It explains:

- what breathlessness is
- what you can do to help you cope better with breathlessness
- where to get additional advice and support.

What is breathlessness?

Everyone feels short of breath sometimes, for example, when you run for a bus or climb the stairs. This is normal and it is good for you! However, you may experience breathlessness due to a health condition and feel out of breath **as part of your daily life**.

Living with breathlessness can be difficult. It can affect you physically and emotionally. The good news is that there are lots of things you can do to help with your breathlessness and get the most out of life.

Breathlessness is also called 'dyspnoea' (pronounced disp-knee-ah).

What does breathlessness feel like?

If you feel breathless you might notice that:

- your chest feels tight
- it is harder to fill up your lungs
- you gasp for air
- you find it difficult to catch your breath
- it is hard to control your breathing
- you feel exhausted
- you feel anxious or panicky.

Breathlessness can come on suddenly or slowly get worse over time. Everyone experiences breathlessness differently.

What causes breathlessness?

There are many different causes of breathlessness. Some of these include:

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) – this affects your airways making it harder for air to move in and out of your lungs. The main cause of COPD is smoking.

Heart failure – this can cause a build-up of fluid in your lungs making it harder to breathe.

Asthma – this causes a narrowing of the airways carrying oxygen in to and out of your lungs.

Anxiety – if you feel anxious you may begin to breathe fast. This makes your breathing muscles tired and so you breathe even faster. This can result in breathlessness and panic.

Managing your breathlessness

Ways to manage breathlessness include:



Treating the cause -

you may be prescribed medication to help treat the cause of your breathlessness.



Using breathing techniques -

these can help you cope when you feel breathless.

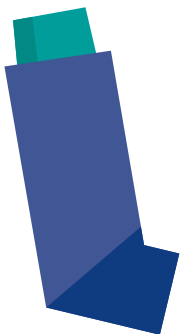


Living a healthy lifestyle -

this can help to reduce your symptoms.

Treating the cause

Depending on the cause of your breathlessness, you may be prescribed medication to help.



Medication may mean using an inhaler, spacer or nebuliser. These help you to breathe medicine straight into your lungs. It is important to make sure you know how to use these in the right way to get the most benefit from them.

Ask your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or physiotherapist to check you are using your inhaler, spacer or nebuliser in the right way. You can also find out more about inhalers and how to use them at:

www.mylungsmylife.org

Breathing control techniques

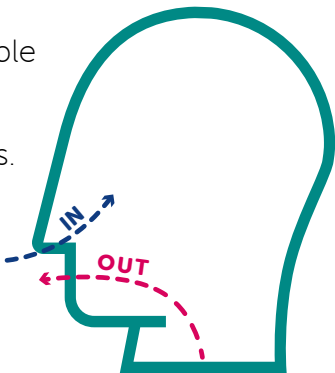
These involve gentle breathing using your diaphragm (your main breathing muscle).

Ask your doctor or nurse about what techniques may be best for you. Practice them and use them as much as possible.

Some examples include:

Relaxed, slow, deep breathing

- Get into a comfortable position.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Breathe in gently through your nose, then out through your mouth.



Pursed-lips breathing

Breathe in through your nose, then out through your mouth with your lips pursed, like you are whistling. This helps to slow your breathing down.

Blow as you go

You can do this when you are doing an activity that needs a lot of effort, for example, when you are standing up or bending down.

Breathe in first before you do the activity and breathe out when doing the activity.

Paced breathing

Breathe in and out in time with the activity you are doing. For example, when walking up stairs, breathe in on one step and breathe out on the next step.

Breathing positions

If you feel breathless, different standing or sitting positions can help your breathing recover and help you breathe more easily.

What works best for you will depend on where you are and what you are doing.



- Sit down and lean forward.
- Rest both arms on your thighs.
- Relax your hands and wrists.



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- Sit upright with your back against the back of a chair.
 - Rest both hands on your thighs.
 - Relax your hands and wrists.



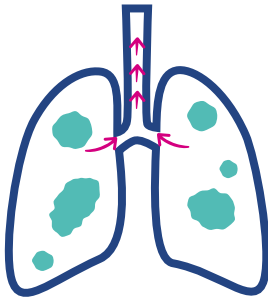
- Stand up.
 - Lean forward with your arms resting on a ledge, for example, a windowsill, bench, handrail or back of a chair.
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- Stand up and lean with your back against a wall.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Rest your arms down by your sides.
- If it feels comfortable, move your feet about 30cm away from the wall.
- Keep your feet slightly apart.

Chest clearing exercises

- Mucus (also called phlegm, sputum or spit) can build up in your lungs and make you feel more breathless.
- It is important to try to get rid of this mucus to help you breathe more easily.
- Your doctor may refer you to a respiratory (chest) physiotherapist. They will show you what exercises you can do to help clear your lungs and will tell you how often to do them.



Breathing at night

If you feel more breathless at night, these tips may help:

Use your breathing control techniques.

If you have one, keep your inhaler, spacer or nebuliser within easy reach.

Keep a fan by your bed and turn it on when you feel breathless.

Try sleeping in an upright position using pillows to support you.

If you wake up breathless, sit up and lean forward - it can help to sit at the edge of the bed, with your feet on the ground, and lean your arms on a bedside table.

Keep a glass of water next to your bed.

Use your chest clearing techniques if needed.

Pulmonary (lung) rehabilitation

Pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) is a free programme of exercise, education and support run by healthcare professionals for people with lung problems.

PR can help you learn how to:

- manage your condition
- control your breathing
- increase your fitness
- improve your quality of life.

There is strong evidence that PR reduces breathlessness and makes you feel better.

Your health professional can refer you to PR. You can also discuss with them if you have not been referred but think it might help.

Know your triggers



For some people, things like smoke and pollen can make their breathlessness worse.

Learn what makes your breathlessness worse (your triggers) and try to avoid them.



Text **WEATHER** to **66777** to receive a free 'Air Quality and Weather' text message from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. The text will tell you about outdoor conditions in your area that may affect your breathing.



Keep up to date with your vaccinations

Being vaccinated lowers your risk of getting chest infections and helps to reduce how bad they are if you do get them.

Living a healthy lifestyle

Stop smoking

Smoking damages your lungs, causes mucus to build up in your airways and narrows your airways. This makes it harder for you to breathe.

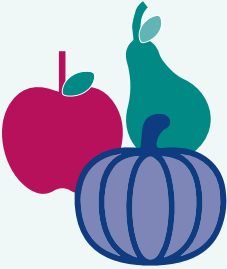
Stopping smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your health and to help with your breathing.



There is lots of free support available to help you stop smoking. Ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist for information or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 848 484**.

Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

Manage your weight, eat well and drink sensibly



Managing your weight, eating a healthy, balanced diet and limiting your alcohol intake are important for your general health and to help avoid or fight chest infections.



Extra weight around your lungs and chest, or being underweight, can also affect how your lungs work.

Keep active

Regular physical activity can help with your breathlessness, increase your energy levels and improve your overall health.

Avoiding activity makes your

breathlessness worse. The more activity you do, the more you will be able to do. Your health professional can help you decide what activities would be good for you depending on your level of breathlessness.



If activities like dressing, washing or cooking make you breathless, speak to your doctor about a referral to an occupational therapist. Your occupational therapist may then be able to arrange equipment or aids to help.

Tips for getting active



- Remember to use your breathing control techniques.
- Pick activities you enjoy doing like walking, gardening or swimming. Even housework counts.
- Set small, realistic goals.
- Pace yourself and don't overdo it.



If you have recently had a flare-up in your symptoms (sometimes called an exacerbation), speak to your doctor, nurse or physiotherapist before starting any exercise or activity again.

Managing anxiety

Some people feel anxious, frightened or panic if they feel like their breathing is out of control.

Learning to recognise when and why you feel anxious can be the first step to feeling more in control.

Doing breathing exercises, listening to relaxing music and using mindfulness techniques can help.

If your breathlessness is making you feel anxious or affecting your mood, it is important to speak to your doctor or other health professional about how you are feeling.



Help from family and friends

Your family and friends can help you manage your breathlessness by:

keeping you calm and reassuring you

helping you to get into a comfortable breathing position

getting you your inhaler, spacer or nebuliser if you have one

opening a window for fresh air or bringing you a fan if this helps

doing your breathing control techniques with you

joining you when you do any exercise or physical activity.



Know when to get medical help

Breathlessness is different for everyone. People may experience different symptoms on different days or at different times.

It is important to know what is 'normal' for you. This will help you to recognise if you are getting more breathless than usual.

If you feel more breathless than usual it is important to tell your doctor.



Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

Ask your doctor for an urgent appointment or home visit if you experience any of the following:

- you feel unwell or feverish
- your coughing has increased
- you have more mucus than normal
- the colour of your mucus has changed.

It is important that you start the antibiotics as soon as possible.

If you need to go to hospital remember to take all your medications and inhalers with you.



Our publications are available for free to anyone in Scotland who needs them. Go to www.chss.org.uk/publications for all our resources, including other Essential Guides in this series.

For free, confidential advice and support from our **Advice Line nurses**, call: 0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9.30am-4pm), text: NURSE to 66777 or email: adviceline@chss.org.uk.

Across Scotland, over one million people – that's one in five of us – are living with the effects of a chest, heart or stroke condition. We are here to help everyone who needs us. But we need your support to do this. Go to www.chss.org.uk/supportus to find out how you can help more people in Scotland.

If you would like this resource in an alternative format, please contact our Advice Line nurses.

**Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland**



NO LIFE HALF LIVED

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