

# HOW TO MANAGE YOUR BREATHLESSNESS IF YOU HAVE A LONG-TERM CHEST CONDITION

**This factsheet aims to give you tips and advice to help you cope with feeling breathless if you have a long-term chest (or lung) condition.**

Everyone gets breathless sometimes – for example, when you exercise, run for a bus or climb lots of stairs. It is normal to be out of breath like this when doing some daily activities. This shortness of breath passes quite quickly when the activity stops and does not usually cause worry.

This information is for people who experience breathlessness as part of daily life.

Living with breathlessness when you have a long-term chest condition such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) can be difficult both emotionally and physically. The good news is that as well as treating the underlying causes of breathlessness, there are various ways that you can manage your breathlessness so you can get the most out of life.

**Healthcare professionals sometimes refer to breathlessness as dyspnoea.**

## People describe their breathlessness in different ways:

*'Difficulty filling my lungs'*

*'Chest tightness'*

*'Gasping for air'*

*'Not being able to catch my breath'*

Breathlessness may come on suddenly (acute) due to a flare up of an underlying condition such as COPD or gradually over a period of time (chronic). Breathlessness varies with each person. It is important to know what your usual or 'normal' amount of breathlessness is. This helps you recognise when you are getting more breathless than usual, so that you can take action. If there is a change in your usual breathlessness during everyday activities, you should visit your doctor to discuss this.

FACTSHEET

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## What can I do to manage my breathlessness?

There are many things you can do to manage your breathlessness and help you get the most out of your life. These include:



If you have been prescribed inhalers to relieve your breathlessness, use these as prescribed.

### Breathing control techniques

With practice you can use breathing control to regain your breath after activity or during an episode of breathlessness. For example, you will be able to use breathing control to help you if you are out for a walk and you need to stop for a rest. It encourages a more normal breathing pattern and helps to get air into the lower part of the lungs.

Breathing control involves gentle breathing, using your upper chest, shoulders and stomach area, which should be supported and relaxed.

Examples of breathing control include:

**Relaxed, slow deep breathing: make sure you are in a comfortable position, relax your shoulders and breathe in gently through your nose and out through your mouth.**

**Blow as you go:** breathe out hard when you are doing an activity that needs a big effort such as bending down, stretching, standing up, as you push and pull a vacuum cleaner or going up or down steps.

**Pursed-lips breathing:** breathe out with your lips pursed as if you are whistling. This helps to slow breathing down and make it more effective.

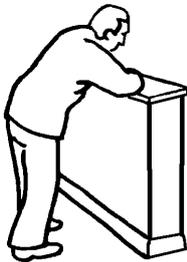
**Paced breathing:** breathe in and out in time with the activity you are doing, such as climbing stairs. Tune in to your breathing rate as you walk or climb.

### Breathing positions

Below are different breathing positions to use with your breathing control. Try them all until you find the one that works best for you depending on where you are and what you are doing.



Sit on a chair leaning forward with both arms resting on your thighs, or sit upright against the back of the chair with your hands resting on your thighs. Relax your hands and wrists.



Stand leaning forward with your arms resting on a ledge, for example a windowsill, bench or banister rail



Lean back against a wall with your shoulders relaxed and arms resting down by your side. Your feet should be about 30cm away from the wall (or as far as is comfortable) and slightly apart.

### **Chest clearance exercises**

People with chest or lung problems often cough and produce more phlegm than is usual. It is important to remove phlegm from your chest to help you breathe more easily, prevent infections and reduce bouts of coughing. These can all make you more short of breath.

Chest clearance exercises help you to clear your chest, reduce obstruction in your airways and improve the amount of air getting into the right part of your lungs. In the long term, chest clearance can help to reduce the number and frequency of chest infections you may have.

It is important that you are shown how to do these exercises by a respiratory (chest) physiotherapist (physio). The physiotherapist will recommend how often you should use these exercises to get the maximum benefit. Ask your GP about being referred to your local respiratory physiotherapist.

### **Keep physically active**

It is important to have a plan for exercising and activity even if you do get breathless. The less you do, the less you will be able to do and we all need exercise and activity to keep our bodies healthy. It is very easy to get stuck in a rut of not exercising or being less active because you feel breathless. By not exercising you will be making your breathlessness worse over time.

***'Everyone can get something from a bit of exercise – you just have to find the right thing. I know now that I need to keep exercising...some days I feel more tired than others but I know trying to stay active really helps me.'***

Physical activity could include walking, gardening or swimming and there are also specialist classes to help you control your breathlessness, get fitter and make friends.

To improve your activity levels you need to be able to stay in control of your breathing. Here are some tips on what to do and what not to do when increasing your activity levels:

- Do not allow yourself to become more than moderately breathless while you are doing something. You should still be able to talk a little as you exercise. If you can't do this, you need to slow down. You may need to walk or move more slowly or stop to recover your breath.
- When you stop an activity, your breathlessness will continue and possibly get worse before it starts to settle to normal. This is why it is important not to allow yourself to be more than moderately breathless when you are exercising. Use breathing control to regain your breath.

- Breathe out on effort and don't hold your breath. If you hold your breath during the most strenuous part of a movement, it can make you more breathless. Remember to 'blow as you go!'
- Move to the rhythm of your breathing. Tune in to your breathing rate and time your steps as you walk and move.

Being able to control your breathing will give you the confidence to be more active.

**Get the most out of your treatment**

Health professionals such as your doctor, practice nurse, respiratory nurse or pharmacist can all help to ensure you are getting the most benefit from any prescribed medicines.

If you have any questions about your treatment make sure you ask.

• **Inhalers**

As with all medicines, inhalers have to be used as prescribed to get the full benefit. There is a huge range of inhalers available; your respiratory professional will help you to find the one that suits you best. Make sure you **know how to use** your inhaler and that you are comfortable using it even when you are very breathless. Your GP, nurse or pharmacist will be happy to help you with your inhaler technique. For more information on the correct way to prepare, use and clean your inhaler visit [www.mylungsmylife.org](http://www.mylungsmylife.org).



• **Using a Spacer**

A spacer is a plastic dome or tube with a mouthpiece at one end and a fitting for your inhaler at the other. A spacer may be useful if you have difficulty with your inhaler technique or the physical handling of an inhaler. Using a spacer may be helpful in making sure you are getting the correct dose of medicine to your lungs.

• **Using a Nebuliser**

Some of the medicine in inhalers is also available in liquid form to be used with a nebuliser. A nebuliser is an electrical machine that is used to help deliver the correct dose of medicine into your lungs. It works by blowing air through a solution of the medicine, creating a very fine mist that can be easily inhaled. It takes around 10 minutes for your medicine to nebulise. Don't use your nebuliser for more than 15 minutes at a time.

**A nebuliser has to be prescribed by a doctor.**

- If your doctor feels that you would benefit from one then he or she will arrange for you to have a nebuliser. The solution for the nebuliser also has to be prescribed.
- Your doctor or respiratory nurse will need to assess and monitor how you use it.
- Nebuliser parts need to be serviced regularly; this may need to be as often as every 3 months.
- You should not use someone else's nebuliser, due to the risk of cross infection and the danger of using incorrect medicines.

See [www.mylungsmylife.org](http://www.mylungsmylife.org) for more information on how to use inhalers, spacers and nebulisers.

**• Other medicines**

It is important that you continue to take all the medicines that your doctor has prescribed. Some of these may be helping to control your breathlessness as well.

**Can oxygen help?**

If your blood oxygen levels are normal, oxygen will not help your breathlessness. But if you have a condition that means the level of oxygen in your blood is low, oxygen treatment can make a difference. If appropriate, your GP will refer you for advice and tests and a respiratory specialist will assess your needs and ensure you use oxygen safely.

**Pulmonary Rehabilitation**

If you have a lung condition you may be referred to pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) as part of your treatment.

PR is a structured programme of exercise and education for people with chronic chest conditions, such as COPD. It is designed to improve your level of fitness and quality of life and can help you learn to manage living with your condition.

Every programme is organised and co-ordinated by a healthcare professional – usually a nurse or a physiotherapist. A healthcare professional will be at every class and will do your initial assessment.

See the CHSS factsheet *Pulmonary Rehabilitation* for more information.



## Coping with Anxiety

Breathlessness because of a chest condition can cause anxiety and sometimes feelings of panic as it can make you feel like it is out of your control. Unfortunately these feelings tend to make breathlessness worse. Recognising your symptoms of anxiety will help you to control them and understand what is actually happening.

Your GP can refer you to a professional such as a counsellor or psychologist who can help you learn techniques to control your feelings of panic and anxiety. Relaxation CDs can also be useful and some community centres run relaxation classes. Your local library or health centre should have information about local classes.

For more information, including tips on recognising symptoms of anxiety and techniques on how to control your feelings, see the CHSS factsheet *Living with Stress and Anxiety*.

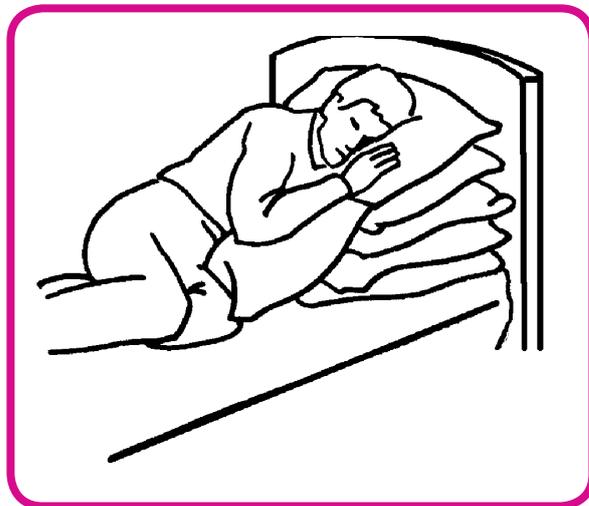
## What can I do if I have breathing difficulties at night?

Some people with chest conditions have breathing difficulties during the night. This can be very frightening and increases anxiety, making your breathlessness worse. Being prepared can help to reassure you when it happens.

- If you wake up breathless, sit up and lean forward. Sitting at the edge of the bed with your feet on the ground and leaning your arms on a bed table may help.
- Try keeping a fan by your bed and turn it on when you are feeling breathless.
- Keep your inhalers by your bed and take your reliever.
- Try and use your breathing control techniques.
- Try not to fight your breathlessness. Relax your shoulders if you can, as tensing your muscles will only use up your energy and make you more breathless.

Tips for sleeping comfortably:

- You may sleep better in an upright position.
- Arrange your pillows as an 'A' shape to help support you.
- Try sleeping on your side; you are less likely to slide down the bed.
- Putting a pillow under your knees when lying on your back can help stop you sliding down the bed.



## How can your carers or family and friends help?

**Family and friends can play an important role in supporting you if you have breathlessness because of a long-term chest condition. Below are some tips on how to help someone who is very breathless:**

- Keep calm
- Reassure the person
- Try putting a fan on close by if this is usually helpful
- Give an inhaler, spacer or nebuliser as prescribed
- Help the person into a comfortable breathing position
- Open a window (if the outside air is fresh)
- Do breathing control with the person

## When to call the doctor

If the person also has an increased cough, increased sputum or changed sputum colour and feels unwell / feverish you should phone the doctor for an urgent appointment or a home visit. If the person needs antibiotics it is important to get them started **as soon as possible**.

## What if admission to hospital is necessary?

Your doctor may feel the person needs to go to hospital. If this is the case you should make sure that all medications are taken to the hospital with the person, especially their inhalers.



For more information on COPD, see the CHSS booklet *Living with COPD* and the CHSS factsheet *10 Common Questions about COPD*. For other long-term chest conditions we also have booklets on *Living with Bronchiectasis*, *Living with tuberculosis* and *Living with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis*. Other factsheets that might be useful include *Stopping Smoking*, *Just Move*, *Healthy Eating*, *Pulmonary rehabilitation*, and *Losing Weight*.

For more information on the self-management of COPD and asthma, including breathlessness, visit [www.mylungsmylife.org](http://www.mylungsmylife.org).

If you would like to speak to one of our nurses in confidence,  
please call the Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland Advice Line Nurses

**0808 801 0899**

Free from landlines and mobiles.