



What is breathlessness?

All of us at some time in our lives have experienced shortness of breath, perhaps from over exertion, the after effects of a chest cold or when feeling particularly anxious or excited. Breathlessness causes you to increase the speed at which you breathe. This causes anxiety, tension and overuse of the muscles in your shoulders and upper chest. All of this makes the effort of breathing harder, by involving more muscles and using more energy. Your breathing can also become shallower. This means that the lungs do not receive as much air, which in turn can add to the feeling of breathlessness.

What causes breathlessness?

There are many reasons for breathlessness, sometimes referred to as dyspnoea (dis-nee-a) and you must always seek medical opinion to establish the cause and confirm the correct course of treatment. Below are common reasons for breathlessness:

- **Anaemia** – Low levels of red cells in the blood can be caused by the cancer or cancer treatments, including chemotherapy or radiotherapy.
- **Anxiety and panic** – Anxiety and panic can alter your natural way of breathing. When we are anxious sometimes we breathe in a more rapid way, using less of our lung capacity. This reduces the amount of air available and can result in a stressful, fast breathing cycle.
- **Blockage** of an airway or artery in the lung.
- **Cancer treatments** – Some chemotherapy drugs can cause breathlessness. Radiotherapy may scar the treated lung causing mild to moderate breathlessness. Surgery, which may have involved removing part/all of the diseased lung, can sometimes cause shortness of breath.
- **Chest infection** – This can result in swelling and/or inflammation in the lung tissue which reduces your ability to breathe deeply and get as much air into the lungs as you normally would.
- **Other lung conditions** such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease COPD.
- **Pain** – If your pain is not controlled, it can make it difficult to breathe comfortably.
- **Pleural effusion** – A build up of fluid in the lining of the lung can be caused by the cancer or an infection.
- **Pulmonary embolism** – A blood clot on the lung.
- **Smoking** makes breathlessness worse and contributes to many current and/or potential health problems.
- **Tiredness/weakness** and generally being very run-down.



Are there breathing techniques that can help my shortness of breath?

Yes, while breathing is something we do all the time and seems automatic, with practice you can learn to increase your control over it.

You can help your breathlessness by:

- Learning to control your breathing
- Breathing exercises
- Learning to relax

Learning to control your breathing

The first step in learning to control your breathing is to become more aware of your breathing pattern generally. Exercise, talking too fast, stressful situations and even excitement can alter your breathing pattern, so try to correct it if it is too shallow or too quick. Pursed-lip breathing and diaphragmatic breathing will both help.

Pursed-lip breathing: Inhale through your nose for several seconds with your mouth closed, then exhale slowly through pursed lips for 4-6 seconds (like you are going to whistle). This helps to empty your lungs of old air, and makes as much room in your lungs for fresh oxygen-rich air.

Diaphragmatic breathing: Relax the top of your chest and shoulders. Place your fingers lightly at the front of your chest on your stomach. Give a little cough and the muscle that you feel under your fingers is the diaphragm. Breathe in and feel the expansion of the lower ribs and stomach rise under your fingers. Breathe out as gently as possible like a sigh, feeling the lower ribs come down and in. Try to repeat this exercise about five or six times.

TOP TIP

Using an electric or handheld fan can help to reduce feelings of breathlessness.



What positions will help me when I am short of breath?

The most important thing is to be comfortable. Choose a position that will suit what you are doing and where you are. Try to be supported so that the upper chest and shoulders can relax. Your physiotherapist can help you if you are unsure.



Sitting leaning forward



Sitting upright



High side lying



Standing leaning Forward



Standing leaning back or sideways

Breathing exercises

The aim is to allow the fresh air into the lungs and get rid of the old air. Try to imagine you are breathing out for twice as long as you breathe in. This will make room for the fresh air and also helps to slow down the speed of your breathing.

Keep your shoulders and the upper chest relaxed and easy. Feel as if the air is going down to your stomach and imagine that the breathing is taking place there.

Expansion of the lower chest.

Place your hands on either side of your chest. Breathe out through your mouth, letting your ribs sink in as far as possible. Then, breathing in through your nose or mouth, feel your ribs expand outwards towards your hands. Gently breathe out to start again. Try to repeat the exercise about five or six times.

It is a good idea to practice this frequently throughout the day, so that they become a habit and can be used when you are feeling breathless.

Coughing can be hard work and can increase breathlessness so, if possible, try to cough only when you are ready to spit out phlegm. Breathing exercises may help to move the phlegm, which will make it easier to spit it out.

For further information about breathing exercises and advice on breathlessness, ask your cancer doctor or lung cancer nurse specialist to refer you to a physiotherapist.



Learning to relax

Another common reaction to anxiety is increased muscle tension, such as hunched shoulders, clenched fists or feeling a knot in your stomach. Learning to relax by letting go of this muscle tension can also be a useful method of controlling anxiety and breathlessness.

Please see our *Living with lung cancer* booklet for more information relaxation. Visit www.roycastle.org/ayqpack or call our free helpline on **0333 323 7200 (option 2)**.

Are there any treatments that will help my breathlessness?

The type of treatment given will depend upon the cause of your breathlessness. Your cancer doctor or lung cancer nurse specialist will discuss which treatment will help your breathlessness. These include:

- **Drug treatments** including painkillers (morphine), steroids and sedatives to help relieve anxiety and panic caused by breathlessness.
- **Bronchodilator drugs** relaxes the muscles in the lungs and opens up the airways. This makes breathing easier. These drugs are normally given through an inhaler or nebuliser.
- **Oxygen therapy** increases the amount of oxygen in the lungs and the bloodstream. If your blood oxygen levels are low, getting more oxygen can help you breathe better. An oxygen cylinder may be given if you only need oxygen for short periods of time. If you need oxygen for longer periods of time, an oxygen concentrator may be supplied. This is a machine which takes oxygen from surrounding air. It is usually given using a face mask or through small tubes that sit under the nostrils (called a nasal cannula).

TOP TIP

It may be that a well ventilated room, using open windows or using an electric or handheld fan, will achieve the same effect as oxygen.

My breathlessness is causing me extreme anxiety. What should I do?

Feelings of extreme (called acute) anxiety can sometimes happen suddenly. It is important to remember that these feelings will subside. While it might be tempting to avoid anxiety provoking situations, in the long term this can affect your self confidence. You can learn to manage anxiety experienced in such situations by facing up to them a little at time and using the breathing techniques mentioned.



For some people being breathless can be frustrating and at times even frightening. A number of people report that breathlessness is commonly linked with anxiety and panic. Unfortunately, anxiety only makes breathlessness worse. It can therefore be useful to learn ways of controlling anxiety and panic. Anxiety is a normal reaction to situations where we may feel frightened or threatened. The anxiety response involves changes in the body, and in the way you think and behave. Some common bodily responses to anxiety include:

- Fast breathing, chest tightness and shortness of breath.
- Muscle tension, trembling or shaking.
- Sweating, cold and clammy hands.
- Heart pounding/racing and palpitations.
- Light headedness, dizziness and feeling faint.

Although you may feel anxious when breathless, try using the breathing techniques discussed and your breathing will naturally slow down as you regain control.

Sometimes it helps to focus on a pleasant image in your mind's eye or do something to take your mind off the breathlessness. Find out what works best for you, for example, relaxing music, comedy show or a scenic view. Remember the fear will subside in time. If you are experiencing significant problems coping with anxiety, it may be useful to discuss with your cancer doctor or lung cancer nurse specialist about being referred to a clinical psychologist.

I get very breathless at the start of the day, is there anything I can do to help this?

When rising, take your time getting out of bed. Sit on the edge of the bed for a few minutes. Perhaps you don't need to get dressed immediately - you may feel better having a warm drink first.

When bathing or showering, you may find that this takes up a lot of energy. Avoid having the water too hot and making the room too steamy. Try opening a window or leave the door slightly open. After your bath it may help to let the water out first then to kneel before getting out. Sit down while showering, especially if you are prone to getting very tired or dizzy. Have a small grab-rail in the shower that you can put your hand onto if you require. Following your bath/shower, sit down to dry yourself or wrap yourself in an absorbent towelling bathrobe. There is a whole range of bathing and showering equipment available to help (see your district nurse or occupational therapist for advice).



When dressing, give yourself as much time as you need. It may be easier to sit down for these activities and it is best to avoid bending as much as possible. You may wish to consider other methods of putting on your socks or shoes. Try a long handled shoehorn or perhaps a member of the family can help. Loose clothing is also often easier to put on and less restrictive on your breathing.

Are there any tips to help me manage tasks around the house?

Avoid too much bending and stretching. It may be easier to sit on a stool when bending down to reach low plugs and switches or, for example, emptying your washing machine. Another tip is to place shopping/washing baskets on a stool or table at waist level, when organising or emptying them. You may wish to consider using a pick-up stick or reacher – useful for picking up the letters from behind the front door.

Organise your house so that items you use frequently are kept within easy reach. Use your work surfaces or table to help you move your utensils or cup of tea around the kitchen - a kitchen trolley can be very useful to carry heavier objects from room to room. Use a flask and a shoulder bag if a trolley is not available or suitable. This can help to carry drinks around and keep both hands free. Keep the phone nearby; a cordless or mobile may be useful. Ask your family and friends to give you plenty of time to answer.

Sit down to do as much as possible, for example, peeling potatoes, drying dishes or waiting for food to cook. Your occupational therapist may be able to arrange for you to be supplied with a perching stool, which is ideal for working at work top height. If you can, try to avoid climbing the stairs too many times during the day. Bring down everything you may need for the day when coming down in the morning.

Try to ensure that your bed or chairs are easy to get on/off. If chairs or the toilet are too low, you will waste a lot of energy struggling to get up. Try to sit on a suitable height of chair. A low toilet can easily be sorted by using a slightly raised toilet seat or perhaps a small grab-rail, strategically placed, on the wall.

TOP TIP Ask your district nurse or occupational therapist for advice on where you can get equipment that will help you.



Can I still get out and about when I'm feeling breathless?

Remember to think ahead when you are planning an evening or a day out. If you are going somewhere unfamiliar, try to get information in advance, for example, make sure that lifts and parking/transport facilities are nearby.

If you have to carry heavy shopping, try to distribute the weight comfortably by using a shopping trolley or rucksack. A wheelchair may be useful to you. Ask your GP or occupational therapist if this would be of benefit to you. Your local shopping centre and supermarket may have wheelchairs available to borrow.

“Rather than carry a heavy bag to appointments, I bought a backpack so I don't have to carry anything and it keeps my hands free.”
Tom

You may find that in certain atmospheres your mouth becomes dry or that you cough more. You may find that cold/damp weather or forced air/humid environments such as shopping centres can make you feel more breathless. It can be helpful to have a small bottle of water or some sweets handy.

If you are having difficulty breathing whilst performing day-to-day activities, such as walking, bathing or dressing, then you may qualify for some financial benefit from the government. You may also be entitled to a disabled badge for parking the car or travelling expenses.

I want to keep active but I'm not sure if I should be exercising.

Would it help me?

It's natural to feel a little nervous about being too active and getting out of breath. However, light exercise can have real benefits to your well being. Certain exercises that focus on breathing can prove helpful, for example, swimming, walking, yoga and pilates.

“I discovered freestyle aerobics to be the best way to improve my breathing. Start very slowly with minimum reps and gradually build up speed and duration.”
Roberta



My breathlessness is affecting my sexual relationship. What can I do to help this?

As with other activities, you may find that your breathlessness affects your sexual relationship. This in turn could lead to frustration between you and your partner at a time when you want to be really close. It might help to set aside time when you can discuss your most intimate feelings with your partner and look at ways that you may overcome any problems. You may find that certain sexual positions make you less breathless than others. If you have a reliever inhaler, it may be of help to use it before and after sexual relations. It might help to discuss any problems with someone not so close, but who is able to answer your questions, such as your GP, cancer doctor or lung cancer nurse specialist.

I am a smoker, will quitting smoking help my breathlessness?

Although most health care professionals will advise you to quit, they will recognise that this is a very individual choice. If you do stop smoking, your breathlessness will improve. You will have better circulation and it will reduce the amount of poisonous chemicals in your body. Research shows that cleaner lungs may also help your recovery from treatments, reduce the risk of the cancer returning and may increase your chance of survival. Our online forum, Quit Support, provides a community to help you stop smoking and offers support and advice from others in the same situation. Visit our forum at healthunlocked.com/quitsupport. This forum allows you to share your experience through blog posts and questions. You can also ask your GP or lung cancer nurse specialist for advice on giving up smoking. Contact details of the NHS Smoking Helplines can be found at the back of our *Living with lung cancer* booklet or visit www.roycastle.org/usefulcontacts

GIVING HELP AND HOPE

The charity has two aims:

Supporting people living with lung cancer - Working closely with lung cancer nurses, we provide information, run lung cancer support groups and offer telephone and online support. Our patient grants offer some financial help to people affected by lung cancer.

Saving lives - We fund lung cancer research, campaign for better treatment and care for people who have lung cancer, and raise awareness of the importance of early diagnosis. Our lung cancer prevention work helps people to quit smoking and encourages young people not to start smoking.

Call us on 0333 323 7200 (option 2)

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