

- Use walking aids, like a wheeled walking frame with a tray or basket. This will provide you with extra support and will make it easier to transport things.
- Carry a stick which can help you to feel less self conscious about going slowly when you are out and about.
- Wipe a cool wet flannel on your upper cheeks and especially around your nose as this can help reduce how breathless you may feel. This is useful if a fan is not available.

### **Permission**

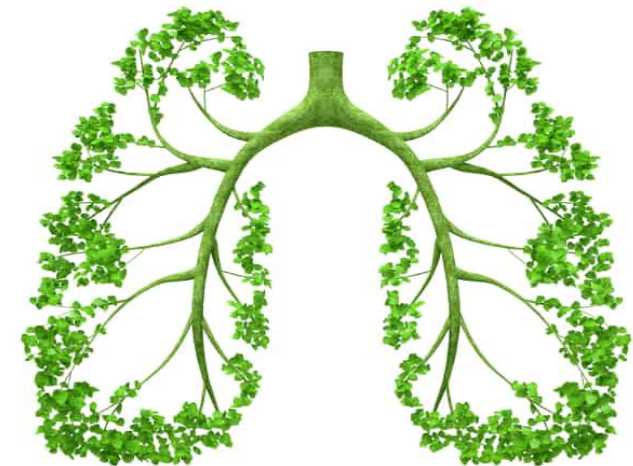
- Give yourself permission to avoid doing things that make you very breathless.
- Think about doing things in different ways and allowing others to help.

**For further support with anxiety and breathlessness once you are home contact your Community Palliative Care Team or GP**

Approved: October 2020  
Review date September 2023

## **Patient Information Leaflet**

# **Managing Breathlessness**



**Please speak to a member of staff if you need this leaflet in large print, braille, audio or another language.**

## What is Breathlessness?

Breathlessness is an uncomfortable feeling of not being able to catch your breath and can be caused by a number of things.

It is different for everyone and may be brought on by activity such as walking or coughing.

A common cause is anxiety but sometimes it can happen for no obvious reason.

### Recognising Symptoms of Anxiety

Some common symptoms of anxiety are:

- Heart palpitations (heart beats that suddenly become more noticeable).
- Feeling sick.
- Sweating.
- A dry mouth.

These feelings can cause fast shallow breathing which can make you more breathless.

### Managing Breathlessness

Breathlessness can be a difficult symptom to live with and can make you feel anxious and frightened.

You can help to manage it yourself by following some simple techniques described in this leaflet.

## Top tips - the 4 'P' s

### Plan, Pace, Prioritise, Permission.

**Plan** your day.

- Think about the activities you most want to do and use your energy for these.

**Pace** yourself.

- Include time to relax in each day.
- Use relaxation CDs that may be available from your local library or Health Care Team.
- Download an app or listen to podcasts.

**Prioritise**

- Find simple ways to do day to day chores like cooking and cleaning.
- Use a small table or cart with wheels to move things around your home.
- Use a pole or tongs with long handles to reach things.
- Put items that you use often in easy to reach places.
- Keep your clothes loose, and wear clothes and shoes that are easy to put on and take off.
- Use a towelling robe after showering or bathing, as you'll use less energy than drying off with a towel.

## Fan Therapy

Research has shown that cooling the face with something as simple as a fan can be effective in reducing breathlessness.

Hand held fans can be extremely useful if you are out and about as they are light and portable.

### How to use your Fan

Get into a comfortable position. Use one of the positions already described in this leaflet.

1. Hold the fan approximately 15cm (6 in) away from your face.
2. Allow the cool air to blow towards your face and move the fan slowly from side to side ensuring the cool air blows towards your nose and mouth.

It can be useful to keep a fan in the room you most often experience breathlessness; i.e, the bedroom.

Fan therapy can also be used in conjunction with breathing and relaxation techniques, medications and oxygen therapy if required.

## Positions to Ease Breathlessness

When you feel breathless, adopting a comfortable position can be helpful. It will allow you to relax and support your upper chest muscles and will enable your diaphragm and tummy to expand.

Familiarise and practise the different positions so that you are able to choose the most appropriate one depending on where you are and what you are doing.

You can also use these positions for practising the breathing techniques described in this leaflet.

### Sitting upright

Sit upright against the back of a firm chair, legs uncrossed and feet on the floor.

Rest your hands on your thighs and relax your shoulders.



## Sitting leaning forwards

Sit in a chair with your knees shoulder width apart and feet on the floor.

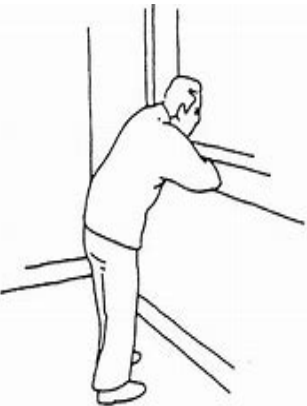
Lean forwards with your elbows resting in your knees and let your shoulders and upper chest relax.



## Standing Leaning forwards

Lean forwards resting your elbows on a solid surface i.e. a wall or a shopping trolley if you are out.

Relax your shoulders and chest by keeping your forearms shoulder width apart.



## Oxygen Therapy

Oxygen is another medication that can be used for breathlessness, however it is not suitable for everyone.

- Oxygen therapy can help with breathlessness if you have low oxygen levels in the blood.
- If you are breathless but your oxygen levels are not low, the other techniques and treatments mentioned in this leaflet are likely to work better for you.
- If you only need oxygen for short periods, your doctor may recommend oxygen that is stored in a cylinder.
- If you need oxygen for longer periods, your doctor may suggest using a machine that filters oxygen from the air around you (oxygen concentrator) and you breathe in the oxygen through a face mask or small tubes that sit under your nostrils (nasal cannula).

Health Care Professionals, such as your GP or a Specialist Nurse will be able to give advice concerning your suitability for treatment by medication or oxygen therapy.

Don't expect results with these techniques overnight. Practising at least 10 minutes a day when you are not breathless will help you become familiar with them and in time enable you to use them to better manage the times when you become breathless.

If you find controlled breathing difficult, we suggest that you take advice from a Chartered Physiotherapist as there are a number of other breathing techniques which may be more suited to you.

## Medication for breathlessness

Depending on the cause of your breathlessness, there are different types of medications available to use:

- Inhaled medication such as inhalers or nebulisers can be used to help expand the lungs or reduce inflammation.
- Morphine and other similar drugs can help with breathlessness as well as pain and can be taken as a tablet, liquid or an injection.
- Steroids can help reduce inflammation in the lungs in some diseases.

## Standing leaning backwards

Lean back/sideways against a wall or a secure surface. Have your feet slightly apart and about 30cms (12 inches) away from the wall.

Let your hands hang loosely by your sides and relax your shoulders and chest.



**Tip:** You can use these positions for practising the breathing techniques described in this leaflet.

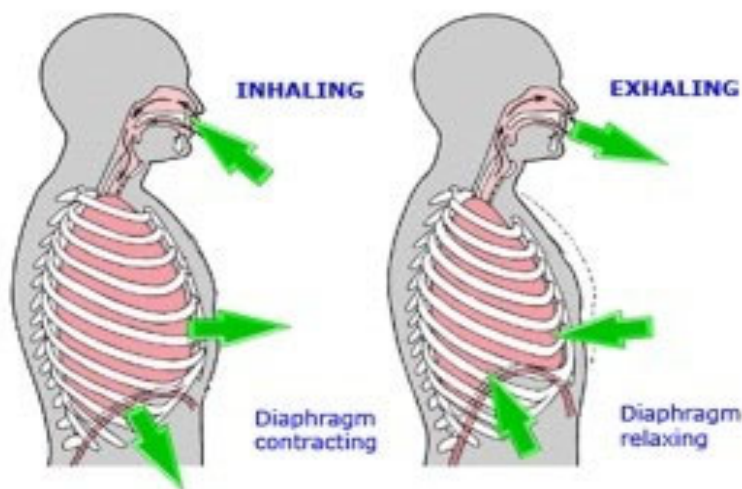
## Breathing & Relaxation Techniques

The main muscle used when breathing is the **diaphragm**.

Breathlessness can cause you to breathe with the upper chest and shoulder muscles rather than your diaphragm. This results in fast, shallow breathing.

As you breathe **IN** your diaphragm moves down to help draw air into the lungs causing your tummy to expand and rise.

As you breathe **OUT** the diaphragm relaxes, returning to its natural resting position and your tummy also rests back in.



This uses up a lot of energy and therefore can tire you out.

A technique known as '**controlled breathing**' can help you manage your breathlessness. This involves relaxed slow breathing using your diaphragm to enable you to breathe more gently and effectively.

12. Now, as your body feels relaxed, become aware of the all-over sensation of letting go, of quiet, calm and resting. Enjoy this feeling of relaxation. If you find your mind becoming busy again, check where your muscles have tensed and then relax them.

13. Slowly bring your attention back to the room that you're in. Have a gentle stretch and open your eyes. Remember to get up slowly once you've finished.

You could try visualising a relaxing scene, such as a favourite place, a garden or the beach.

You could also spend some time exploring different relaxation techniques to find one that is helpful to you.

**Please note:** If you have effectively relaxed, your blood pressure may have dropped a little and you may feel dizzy if you get up suddenly.

If you bend and stretch your arms and legs a few times before standing up your blood pressure should soon return to normal.

**Once you feel comfortable doing this, you can move on to the next stage.**

4. Begin to think of each part of your body in turn.
5. Start with your feet and check they are relaxed and comfortable. Allow them to feel heavy and free of any tension.
6. Now think about your legs and allow your thighs to relax and roll outwards.
7. Next, let your tummy muscles become soft and relaxed.
8. Think about your fingers and let them become limp and still. Allow this feeling of relaxation to spread up your arms to your shoulders.
9. Let your shoulders relax and drop easily.
10. Let your neck muscles relax. Your head is resting and supported. Enjoy this feeling of relaxation.
11. Allow your face and expression to relax; make sure your teeth are not clenched and let your jaw rest in a relaxed position.

### **How do I practise Controlled Breathing?**

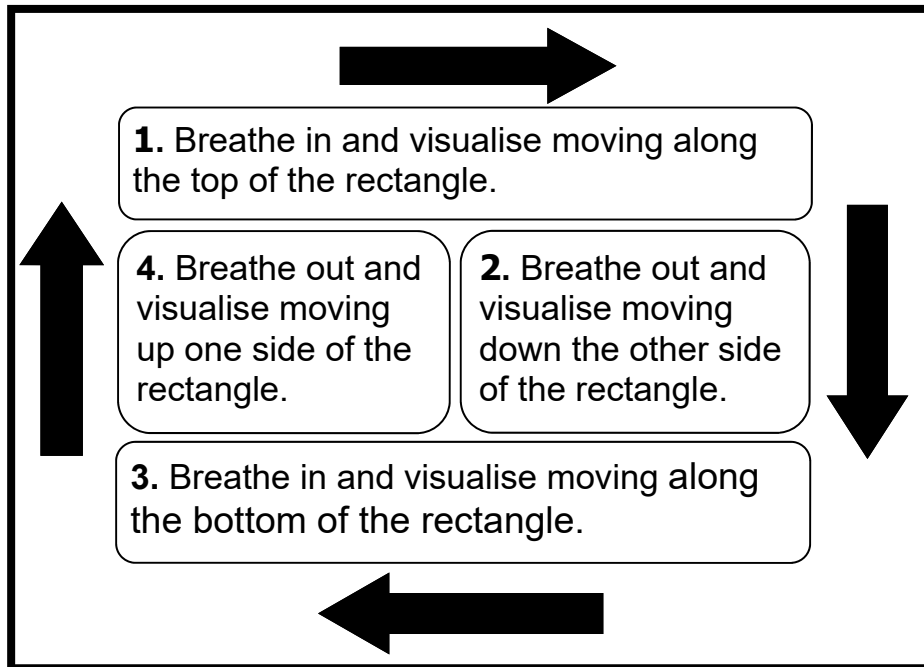
1. Sit comfortably with your back, neck and shoulders supported. If possible lie down with one pillow supporting your neck and another pillow under your knees.
2. Place one hand on your stomach and the other hand relaxed by your side.
3. Gently close your mouth. Keep your lips together and your jaw loose.
4. Relax your shoulders.
5. Breathe in through your nose, feeling your tummy rise under your hand as you breathe in. Breathe in through your mouth if you are unable to breathe through your nose.
6. Breathe out slowly and feel your tummy sink back down.

Your upper chest and shoulders should not move much at all.

If you struggle to relax then ask someone to press down gently on your shoulders (whilst in an upright position), to relieve some of the tension.

## Rectangle Breathing

Another breathing technique that can be useful for getting your breathing under control is rectangle breathing. Imagine a rectangle, or if available you can look at one in the room, i.e a window, TV



Repeat the exercise until you feel your breathing is under control.

As you get used to using this technique, try breathing out for longer than you're breathing in.

This technique requires some concentration so it can be helpful as a distraction when you may be feeling anxious or worried.

## Relaxation Technique

Breathlessness can cause you to feel panicky or anxious, which then makes you feel even more breathless.

Learning a relaxation technique can help you cope with your breathlessness. The more you practice relaxation, the easier and more effective it will be.

Always try to find a quiet and comfortable place to do this. You can be sitting or lying down, as long as you are comfortable with your shoulders, neck and back supported.

If possible, ask someone to read the following relaxation exercise to you as this will make it easier to focus on the technique.

1. Close your eyes.
2. Begin by breathing **out** and then **in**, just as much as you need. Then breathe out slowly with a slight sigh, like a balloon slowly deflating.  
  
Do this once more, as slowly as you can and as you breathe out feel any tension in your body begin to drain away.
3. Make sure to keep your breathing at an even, steady pace.