

# Managing breathlessness

Therapy department



01935 475 122  
[yeovilhospital.nhs.uk](http://yeovilhospital.nhs.uk)

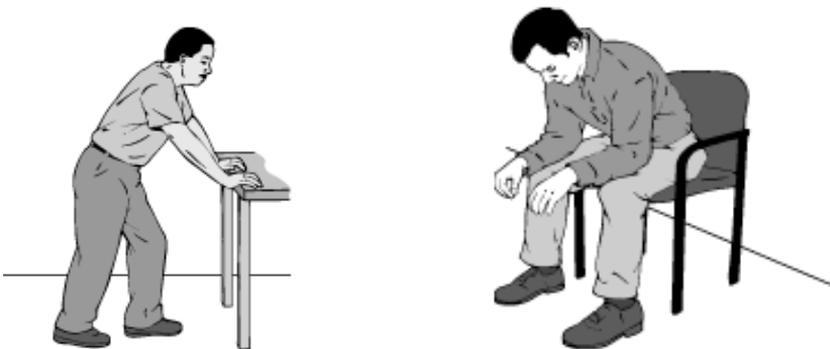
## Breathlessness

Being breathless is an unpleasant sensation of difficult or laboured breathing; this can occur during activities but can also happen when at rest. It is expected that during exercise you can become out of breath however, if you struggle to recover or get short of breath during smaller activities, it can start to have a greater effect on your life. Here are some strategies to help support you with this.

## Coping strategies

### Positioning

It is good to find a position that supports the shoulders, relaxes the upper chest and allows the abdomen and diaphragm to expand. Here are a few examples:



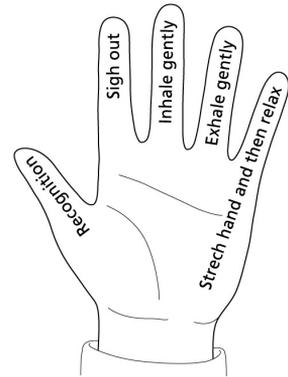
If you find a position that is more comfortable for you then use this, the aim is to find something that suits you.

### Purse lip breathing

- Remembering to breathe out is as important as breathing in.
- Breathe out as slowly as you can through pursed lips.
- It may help to imagine you are flickering the flame of a candle.
- You can continue to do this until your breathing feels settled.

## Calming hand

Place your hand in your lap or on the arm of a chair. Make sure your palm is facing you. Always start with your thumb. As you grasp each finger in turn, follow the instructions below:



**Thumb:** Recognise your signs of panic and the need to use the hand

**First finger:** Sigh out gently

**Middle finger:** Allow the air in, breathing around the waist

**Ring finger:** Breathe out slowly - try to make the breath out slightly longer than the breath in.

**Little finger:** Stretch out your fingers, until you feel the tension build in the arms then STOP, let the hand drop, feel the tension go and your shoulders relax. Sometimes just hand-stretching is enough to stop a panic developing.

## Fatigue

Fatigue is a feeling of extreme tiredness and lack of energy. It may be physical, emotional and /or mental exhaustion. People who have severe fatigue describe it as 'paralysing'.

## How to cope with practical tasks

Planning your activities can help you to identify and achieve the things you really want to do. It is important to pace yourself while completing everyday activities.

## Here are some strategies of how you can achieve this:

### Shopping

Ask others to do your shopping for you is possible. If there is no-one who can, or you would rather complete the shopping yourself, then here are some ways that can help you:

- See if there is anyone who could come with you.
- Make a shopping list so you know exactly what you need and in the order that the store is laid out if this is possible.
- Use a shopping trolley to support you.
- Use a wheeled shopping bag to carry supplies rather than carrying bags.

- Ask in the store for the members of staff to help with packing or carrying items to the car or ask them if they could deliver it to your home.
- Shop at less busy times of the day.

**Remember:** There is always online shopping which is a simple way of completing your own shopping and you can choose a suitable time for them to deliver it to you.

## Meal preparation

First things first, organise your kitchen so that items that you use most are at the most appropriate place for you so you don't have to bend or stretch to reach items. If you are unable to do this, see if a friend/family member could help with this.

- Try to complete cooking in stages if possible ie. Peel the potatoes/have a rest/prepare the veg/have a rest etc.
- Sit down to complete these tasks, equipment such as perching stools can be provided by occupational therapists to assist with this.
- Avoid lifting heavy pans. If possible put in multiple pans so they are less heavy to pick up.
- Dish up by the oven if possible to avoid having to carry heavy/hot items.
- If possible get others to carry items to the table.
- Try cooking simpler meals that reduced the amount of time that you need to be in the kitchen
- If you aren't keen on cooking think about ready meals which can be bought in supermarkets/Wiltshire farm foods/ Oaks house foods.
- Use a dishwasher if possible or leave items to soak so you don't need to scrub pans/plates/cutlery etc.
- If you don't feel like eating a big meal try to have small meals little and often.

## Washing and dressing

When getting washed and dressed it is important to ensure you allow yourself plenty of time as the more you rush the more you may struggle to control your breathing. Complete this task when you can take your time, this maybe in the morning/afternoon/

evening, find the time that is most convenient for you. Below are some techniques that may help you:

- Sit down to have a wash where possible using a bath board/perching stool/shower stool (speak to OT on the ward about this).
- Take breaks throughout task where possible.
- Sit down when shaving or applying make-up.
- Sit down when getting dressed.
- Try to avoid bending down to put on socks/tights/shoes. Talk to the OT on the ward about different aids that can help you put on these items without bending over.

## Domestic tasks

Domestic tasks can be hard work, so remember to ask your friends/neighbours/family for support or, if you are able, employ someone to support you with these tasks. Below are some ideas of different ways that may help you complete these tasks:

- Spread tasks over the week, a little bit each day.
- Sit down to complete tasks where possible.
- Use a trolley to put washing on so you're not having to carry heavy items.
- Get help where possible to hang up washing.
- Use long handled dusters/mops/dustpans where possible which can help avoid stretching/bending.
- If you are able to get someone in to complete domestic tasks ie. gardener/cleaner
- Ask a neighbour/friend if they are able to put out the rubbish/recycling for you

## Talking on the phone

Don't rush to the phone, make your family/friends aware that it takes you time to answer the phone and to be patient or leave a message and you will call them back as soon as you can. Ensure you are sitting down and relaxed before you pick up the phone. If you find you become breathless while talking on the telephone or in conversation, try not to talk too quickly. Try to talk slowly, using short sentences and pausing after each sentence to take a relaxed breath.

## Breathlessness cycle

Breathing is something that happens automatically and most of us take it for granted. Being breathless is an unpleasant sensation of difficult or laboured breathing that is out of proportion with the activity. Being breathless can lead to inactivity as shown below:



## How do I break this cycle?

In order to break the cycle of inactivity you need to do more physical activity. Exerting yourself makes you out of breath - this is normal! It is not dangerous for you to get out of breath, as long as you are able to recover. Give yourself time to do this and use the techniques described in this leaflet to help if needed.

## Anxiety

Being breathless can be very frightening and is not unusual to feel anxious. This is an emotional reaction which is a protective action from your body similar to when something causes you pain. This can increase your breathing rate and cause you to tense your muscles which can contribute to breathlessness.

## Relaxed breathing

This should be attempted when you are relaxed and not breathless.

Once you are in a comfortable position, try gentle, relaxed breathing. Place your hand on your tummy just below the ribs. Gently sigh out, allowing the tummy to “shrink” as you do so. Then, “allow” the air in, feeling your tummy expand slightly as you do so (like filling a balloon). Focus on where the breathing is happening – a feeling of breathing around the waist. If you find this difficult, try watching the movement in a mirror. Or, try putting a light object on your tummy (an empty yoghurt pot is ideal) and watch how it moves with your breathing.

As you breathe out, imagine that you are making a candle flame flicker; feel your shoulders and upper chest relax. Try making the breath out twice as long as the breath in. Sigh out, pause, then allow the air in.

## Ten point plan

1. Position yourself comfortably.
2. Have cool air on your face – use a fan or open a window.
3. Take sips of cold water or sharp fruit drinks – these may make your throat feel clearer.
4. Practise relaxed, gentle breathing. If in doubt, sigh out.
5. Listen to music you find relaxing or a relaxation tape or watch TV.
6. Wear loose clothing.
7. Relaxing massage for the neck and shoulder can be helpful, possibly using appropriate aromatherapy oil.
8. Use the “calming hand” or whatever else helps when you start to feel anxious or panicky.
9. Try breathing in the pattern “in for one, out for two”.
10. Try to let your muscles breathe with you rather than against you.

These are all suggestions of what might be helpful for you to cope with breathlessness but there is no right or wrong technique and it’s about what works for you. With any of the techniques above it helps to practise daily. If you have any questions after reading this leaflet please speak to your therapist on the ward or your GP once you are at home.

## Relaxation

Learning to relax can be helpful in reducing anxiety and managing the experience of breathlessness, you may like to try some of the following:

1. Find a quiet place to sit or lie down.
2. Make yourself comfortable.
3. Listen to some relaxing music.
4. When comfortable breathe in and out gently at your own pace - don't force your breathing.
5. As you breathe imagine yourself in a pleasant place where you feel relaxed and imagine your muscles relaxing.

## Helpful contacts:

- **British lung foundation**  
[www.blf.org.uk/Home](http://www.blf.org.uk/Home)  
Tel: 03000 030 555
- **NHS Choices**  
[www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/pages/home.aspx)
- **British Red Cross**  
[www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)  
Tel: 0844 871 1111
- **Macmillan** also offer breathless support  
[www.macmillan.org.uk/](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/)  
Tel: 0808 808 0000

**If you would like this leaflet in another format or in a different language, please ask a member of staff.**

**Yeovil District Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust  
Higher Kingston  
Yeovil  
Somerset  
BA21 4AT**

## References

Information collaborated from booklets created by St Margaret's Hospice and Macmillan cancer support alongside pre-existing energy conservation leaflet by YDH as well as personal knowledge.