

Breathlessness

Helpful information and tips

What is Breathlessness?

Breathlessness is when one experiences shortness of breath or difficulty breathing. The medical term for breathlessness is dyspnoea (pronounced 'dis-nee-ah').

What causes breathlessness?

There are many causes of breathlessness such as cancer, build up of fluid in the lining of the lungs or stomach, anaemia, chest infection, weakened muscles, pain, smoking, heart or lung problems.

If you want to know more about the reasons for your own breathlessness, it is advised that you speak to your doctor.

How Breathing Works

When we breathe normally we use our diaphragm and muscles around our ribs. When we breathe in, the muscles around the ribs make more space by pulling the ribcage up and out. The lungs expand and air comes in. Oxygen gets into the blood stream from the lungs and is pumped around the body.

What Happens When One Feels Breathless?

You may find you breathe more quickly, taking shallower breaths. This results in you feeling more breathless. The reason you become breathless is because your body needs more oxygen.

Managing Breathlessness

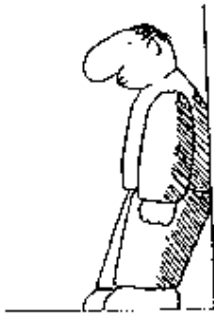
Getting into a comfortable position...



Sit at a table, leaning forwards chest & head supported by 1 or 2 pillows



Sit leaning forwards with your arms resting on



Standing resting backwards against a wall or ledge



Standing leaning forwards

Controlled Breathing

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

To try and control your breathing, here is a suggested exercise you can try on your own or with a friend/relative.

- 1) Sit comfortably with your back, shoulders and neck well supported.
- 2) Breathe in gently (ideally through your nose).
- 3) Breathe out slowly.

Relax your Shoulders

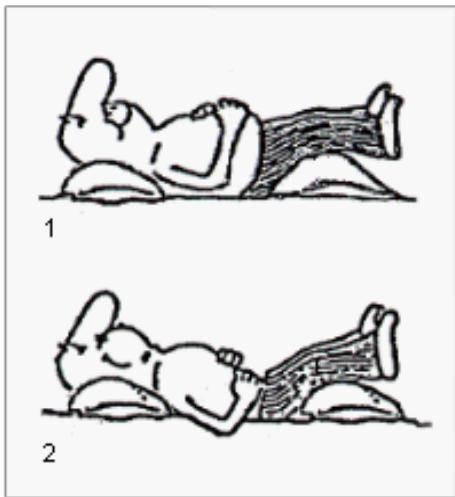
As you breathe out, feel your shoulders and upper chest relax. Try and keep them relaxed as you breathe in.

if this is hard to do, ask someone to press down gently on your shoulders to try and relieve some of the tension.

You could stroke gently and slowly down your arms from shoulders to hands. This can also be done by another person stood behind you. This can help slow down your breathing and aids relaxation.

To check whether you are breathing from the lower chest:

1. Place your hands on your tummy, just below your ribcage. As you breathe in, you should feel your hands rising.
2. As you breathe out, your hands will sink back down and in.



Remember the 3 R's

Rise: tummy rises as you breathe in

Relax: relax the tummy as you breath out

Rest: do not rush into the next breath, wait for it to come

Using a handheld fan



This is a simple but effective way of easing breathlessness.

Get into a comfortable position – see page 3

Hold the fan yourself (if possible) about 6 inch away from your face.

Let the cool air blow towards the middle part of your face – around the sides of your nose and above your upper lip

Alternatives to using a fan:

*sitting in front of an open window *

using a cool flannel on your face

Indicating how breathless you are

When you become breathless, it may help to give your family, friends and healthcare professionals an idea of how breathless you are.

A Borg Scale can be used to give your breathlessness a number. It is suggested that you use this before you try any of the techniques in this booklet and then again afterwards so you can see how the techniques have helped you.

0	Nothing at all
0.5	Very, very slight (just noticeable)
1	Very slight
2	Slight (light)
3	Moderate
4	Somewhat severe
5	Severe (heavy)
6	
7	Very Severe
8	
9	
10	Very, Very Severe

If you score yourself high, try not to be alarmed. The techniques in this booklet could help you.

Further Breathing Tips

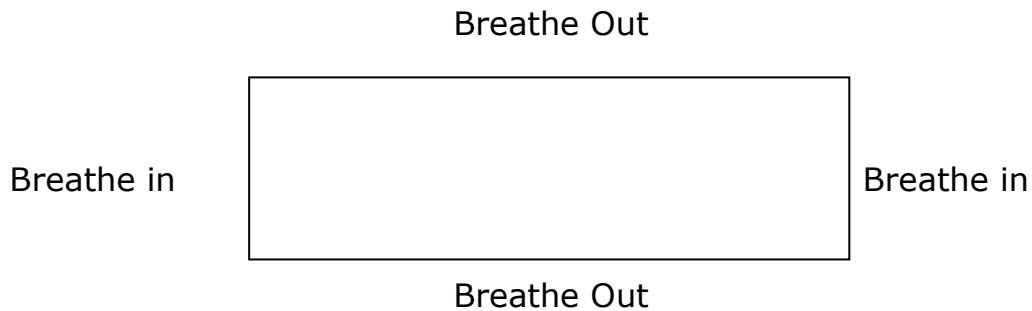
Counting

- 1) Sigh out gently – relax shoulders, gentle breath in.
- 2) Breathe out to the count of 4 (1-2-3-4).
- 3) Breathe in count of 2 (1-2) – repeat this 5 times.

The Breathing Rectangle

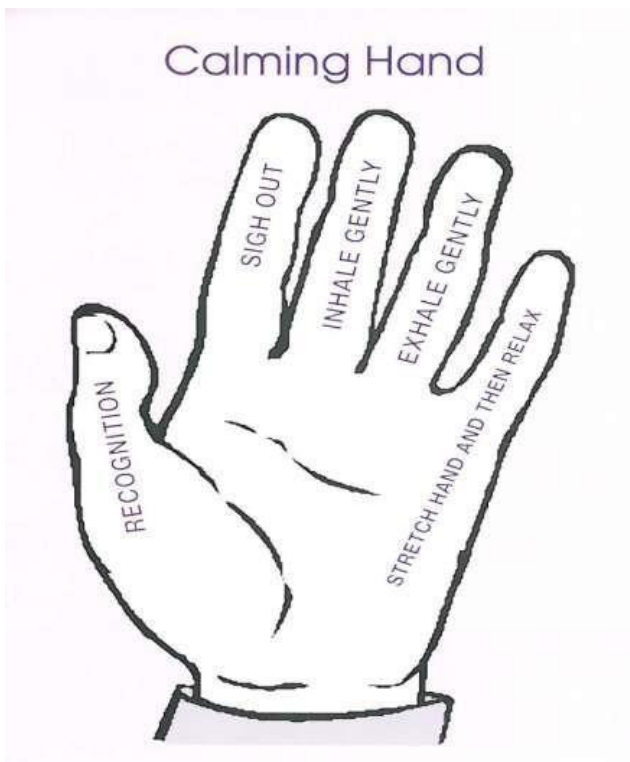
Wherever you are, you can usually see a rectangle shape e.g. a picture, TV, photograph, book etc. When trying to control your breathing it may help to follow the edge of a rectangle with your eyes. This can help to pace and slow your breathing.

Breathe out following long line, breathe in following short line.



gradually slowing down the pace at which your eyes move will help slow your breathing.

The Calming Hand



START with the Thumb – recognise that you are short of breath

Forefinger – sigh out

3rd finger – breathe in gently

4th finger – breathe out slowly

5th finger – stretch your hand, relax and begin again



Activities of Daily Living



Although it is beneficial to keep active, daily activities can feel overwhelming at times.

Prioritise save your energy for things that need doing or are most important to you.

Plan ahead Plan movement/ activity. Be organised.
Think about whether tasks are easier at a certain time of day.

Pace Allow time to complete activity, taking breaks if needed.



Tips for daily activities around the house

- Sit down when washing and/or dressing or preparing food, ironing.
- Arrange your kitchen and other rooms so that items you need/use the most are at waist-height and are easy to reach.
- Try to avoid bending from the waist down – this can restrict your breathing.
- A V-shaped pillow can help support you in a more upright position in bed.
- Use breathing control, e.g., breathe out when walking up two stairs/steps; breathe in for one stair/step
- Rest as necessary – consider leaving a chair in the hallway so you can rest between rooms.

Tips for going out



- If you are planning an outing somewhere unfamiliar, it may help to get information in advance. E.g. is there a lift, parking and what the facilities are like.
- Take a small bottle of water with you – the air can be drier in some places, causing a dry mouth. You could also take your handheld fan.
- When walking, try to use controlled breathing and take it easy.
- Walking aids may be useful – speak to your health professional if you feel one may benefit you.
- The shop mobility, motability and Blue Badge schemes may be able to help you get out and about.

Blue badge scheme: for further information contact your local council.

www.gov.uk/browse/driving/blue-badge-parking

Motability: a scheme enabling disabled people to lease a new car, scooter or powered wheelchair by exchanging their government funded mobility allowance.

Tel: 0845 456 4566

www.motability.co.uk

National Federation of Shop mobility UK: A UK registered charity that supports individual shop mobility schemes, which allow people to hire equipment such as wheelchairs and powered scooters for public places.

Tel:0844 4141 850 (Mon-Fri 10am-4pm)

www.shopmobilityuk.org

email: info@shopmobilityuk.org

Further Tips

- Your feelings: Many people can feel down at various times. Some days you may feel well and relaxed and other days you may feel anxious. Talking with a family member or friend can help you to understand each other better. Alternatively you can contact a charity, organisation or speak to a healthcare professional to find out about support in your area.

- Keeping a diary: It may be helpful to keep a note of when your breathlessness has been difficult, what makes it worse and what techniques you used to deal with it.
- Keep a calendar: This can help you plan activities for the times of day when you feel better.
- Complementary Therapies: there are many different therapies that could help you relax and manage your breathlessness.

Useful Contacts

British Lung Foundation www.blf.org.uk 03000 030 555 (helpline)	Macmillan www.macmillan.org.uk 0808 808 00 00 (cancer support line)
Hospice of the Valleys -	01495 717277
St David's Foundation -	01633 851051
Macmillan Nurses	- 01874 712445

References

Booth, S., Burkin, J., Moffat, C., and Spathis, A. (2014) Managing Breathlessness in Clinical Practice. London: Springer
 Macmillan Cancer Support (2013) Managing Breathlessness. (2nd ed.) London: Macmillan Cancer Support.

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**“This document is available in Welsh /
Mae'r ddogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg”.**