

# Breathlessness

A patient's guide

## Introduction

Breathlessness is a sensation felt by an individual. This feeling can be described in a number of ways, for example, 'difficulty breathing', 'shortness of breath', 'chest tightness' or 'I can't get enough air into my lungs'. Breathlessness can be very limiting. However it is a normal response to exercise.

Breathlessness has many different causes, such as lung conditions, heart conditions, cancers, weakness of the breathing muscles and general weakness due to an acute illness or infection. This makes the exercise response to breathlessness more exaggerated than in people who do not have these problems.

## Healthy not harmful

Sometimes the fear of breathlessness leads to inactivity, which further results in decreased fitness, increased anxiety, loss of independence and reduced self-esteem.

Breathlessness is a normal response to exercising. You may find it beneficial to think about challenging your breathlessness

by exercising in a controlled way. It is in fact 'healthy not harmful'.

Small changes in the way you breathe, move and manage your breathlessness can make a positive difference to how you feel and what you can achieve.

This booklet outlines some strategies that can help you to manage your breathlessness and enable you to regain or maintain your fitness. This will, in turn, help you to cope with your activities of daily living and improve your feeling of well-being.

*The booklet is divided into four sections:*

- A. Breathing control/relaxed breathing
- B. Positions to use when breathless
- C. Exercise and why it is important
- D. Pacing activity

## **A. Breathing control/relaxed breathing**

When you become breathless you will need to let the air flow in and out as easily as possible through your mouth and/or nose. Some people adopt a pursed lip breathing pattern which can be helpful.

When your breathing first starts to feel a little better, try the following technique to help to get your breath back.

Breathing Control is a method that involves you taking normal relaxed breaths using the lower part of your chest. Keep your shoulders as relaxed as possible. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth or nose. Breathe at a comfortable pace but try to breathe out slower.

It is useful to do this relaxed breathing before you tackle something that you know will make you breathless. You will then start the activity as relaxed and in control of your breathing as possible.

It is helpful to do this in a good position. Look at the pictures for postures that may help.

### **Action plan**

- STOP
- ADOPT A GOOD POSITION
- USE BREATHING CONTROL

## B. Positions to use when breathless

### TIP

If you fix your arms in one position, your shoulder muscles can help your breathing muscles, which is why some people feel they can breathe better walking when they are pushing a trolley.



## C. Exercise and why it is important

You may feel exercise is out of the question, and may consciously avoid becoming breathless as it is not a nice feeling. Unfortunately this belief can lead to a vicious circle of inactivity (see below), as you tend to avoid effort and exercise. The result is a loss of physical fitness and muscle strength, which in turn will make you feel more breathless in normal daily life.

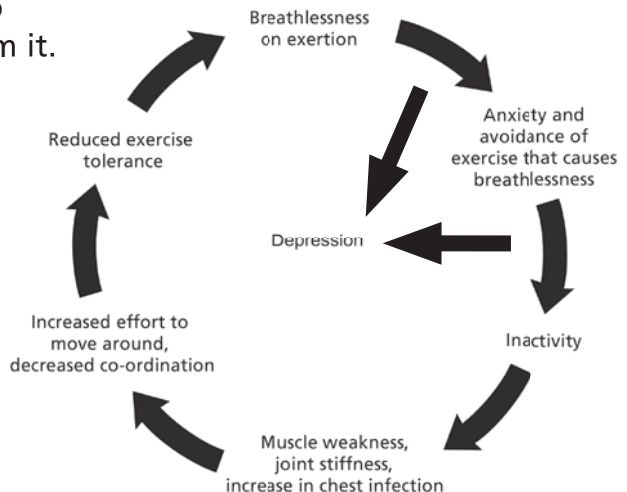
Regular exercise and management of breathlessness can help you to break the cycle of inactivity by:

- Reducing the feeling and fear of breathlessness. By challenging your breathlessness in a controlled way you may be able to desensitise yourself from it.

- Maintain or increase your muscle strength
- Maintain or improve flexibility and circulation
- Improve your feeling of well-being and self-confidence

These will all help to increase your ability to exercise. A few simple exercises done daily can also help to maintain and improve strength, suppleness and stamina.

You should discuss with your physiotherapist the exercise most suitable for you.



*Cycle of breathlessness and inactivity*

### ***Walking:***

Walking is a good way of maintaining and improving your fitness.

- Dress in loose fitting clothes and wear comfortable shoes
- Walk at a pace that enables you to maintain comfortable breathing. You should still be able to walk and talk if necessary
- Start with a distance or time that you can manage comfortably, and gradually build it up over time. Once you can manage a reasonable distance you may then want to increase your pace.

### **D. Pacing activity**

Pacing is a way of breaking activities down into small, easily achievable parts.

Activities will take longer but you will have the satisfaction of being able to complete a task without feeling more uncomfortable. Your activities will become more effective, your mood will improve and pacing will help you to remain physically active.

#### ***Pacing activities:***

- Break activities into small manageable parts
- Set achievable goals - be realistic about what you can manage
- Alternate heavy tasks with light tasks
- Do not rush when carrying out jobs
- Take frequent short rests, they are more beneficial than fewer longer rests

#### ***Planning and prioritising your day:***

- Consider the best time of day for each activity - for instance, if your breathing is easier in the afternoon plan your activities for this time
- Plan around medication times

- Avoid too many trips up and down the stairs
- Try not to squeeze too much into one day
- Prioritise between the tasks you have to do and those which can be delegated to others
- Remember you might not be able to do as much in extremes of weather

***Be energy efficient:***

- Use correct lifting techniques. Sometimes it is easier to push or pull an object than lift it
- Breathe out during the most strenuous part of your activity. For example, breathe out when you stand up from a chair
- Sit rather than stand for activities when possible

**Other tips**

***Cool air:***

Cooling your face with the following can help reduce the feeling of breathlessness:

- Cold air or water
- A small handheld fan or free standing fan
- A cold draught from an open window

***Relaxation:***

Relaxation techniques can be very helpful in reducing anxiety, tension and managing the experience of breathlessness. It is a skill that can be learned, and then used in times of stress and anxiety.

Discuss this with your physiotherapist or specialist nurse to find out more about relaxation techniques.

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Author ID: Physiotherapist  
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Reprinted: January 2016  
Review due: April 2018  
Version: 2  
Leaflet number: PI 144

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