



Breathlessness Self-Management

A guide for patients, families and friends



Breathlessness is a common symptom for many conditions. This leaflet is supplied to anybody that is experiencing breathlessness to be used alongside symptom management advice from health care professionals as part of Saint Francis Hospice service provision.

If you would like to speak to a member of the Therapies Team to discuss what may be of benefit to you, please contact us on 01708 753319 ext 2222 / 3053 and speak to a member of the team.

What is breathlessness?

It is normal to get out of breath when we are exerting ourselves.

Often when we complete exercise or an effortful activity we become short of breath; this is a normal part of keeping fit and strong.












However, breathlessness as a chronic symptom is shortness of breath that is either experienced at rest or is disproportionate to the activity that you are completing.

What is the symptom of breathlessness?

Breathlessness can be called shortness of breath or dyspnoea. It can be very distressing and frightening for those who experience it. Everyone experiences it differently, which makes it a complex symptom to manage.

What causes breathlessness?

Breathlessness is common for people experiencing:

-  Cancer
-  Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
-  Pulmonary fibrosis
-  Long term asthma
-  Heart failure
-  Motor neurone disease
-  Multiple sclerosis
-  Cystic fibrosis
-  Anaemia
-  Kidney disease
-  Covid 19; breathlessness is common during and after the infection

Types of breathlessness

Breathlessness can be:

- ♥ Acute
 - o Coming on suddenly, often this is an emergency
- ♥ Chronic
 - o Gradually increasing over time
- ♥ Episodic
 - o Comes and goes over time

This leaflet will provide advice around chronic or episodic breathlessness management.

Please note: if you experience acute breathlessness that comes on suddenly and unexpectedly and you cannot catch your breath, then you require emergency intervention and should call 999.

Effects of breathlessness

Breathlessness affects everyone differently. Some people may have minimal symptoms and others will experience more severe breathlessness.

If breathlessness is interfering with your daily life and ability to manage your daily occupations, this can be very distressing. It is helpful to discuss your breathlessness with healthcare professionals involved in your care, particularly your Occupational Therapist or Physiotherapist, as they can provide strategies to help you manage your breathlessness.

Please feel free to request an assessment by the Therapy team, as they can provide you with one to one sessions to discuss your breathlessness and put a management plan into place.

You may experience:

Given that breathlessness is so subjective, there are a wide range of things you may experience. Commonly reported feelings are:

- | | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| ♥ Feeling hot | ♥ Effortful breathing |
| ♥ Feeling a sense of panic | ♥ Feeling anxious / overwhelmed |
| ♥ Chest tightness | ♥ Having a fear of suffocating and dying |
| ♥ Rapid breathing / panting | |

The breathing, thinking, functioning model of breathlessness

This model shows how our breathing, thoughts and function are connected in influencing breathlessness.

Breathing

When we are breathless there are changes to our breathing patterns. We tend to worry that we are not getting enough air in, which leads to quick, panting type breaths. These breaths only inflate the top of our lungs, meaning that we do not take in sufficient air to fill our lungs. We also tend to sit hunched over, which further reduces our ability to take in sufficient air.

As we begin to breathe faster and faster, there is not enough time to empty our lungs between breaths. This leads to an over expanded chest and less efficient breathing.

Thinking

There is a vicious cycle of breathlessness. When we begin to feel breathless, our anxiety levels increase. As the anxiety grows, we breathe faster and the effort of our breathing increases. This indirectly makes the breathlessness worse.

Functioning

When we experience breathlessness during an activity, there is a tendency to avoid that activity to avoid feeling breathless again. This results in weakening of our muscles. That weakening means that the muscles do not work as well and use oxygen less efficiently, which serves to increase breathlessness. As a result of this increasing breathlessness, we avoid activity more, which further increases the breathlessness and we become stuck in the vicious cycle.

This leaflet will provide you with strategies to maximise and promote efficient breathing patterns, manage your anxiety and promote activity, with the aim of improving your breathlessness.

How can I manage my breathlessness?

The rest of this leaflet is dedicated to providing you with strategies to help manage your breathlessness. We recommend you trial a variety of techniques to find something that works for you.

We will cover:

- ♥ Positions of ease
- ♥ Air flow
- ♥ Abdominal / diaphragmatic breathing
- ♥ Breathing techniques
- ♥ The role of activity
- ♥ The link between anxiety and breathlessness
 - Square breathing
 - The calming hand
 - Grounding
 - Visualisation

This leaflet addresses non-pharmacological treatments for breathlessness. If you wish to discuss oxygen use or medication then please do so with your Doctor.

Positions of ease

These positions are beneficial for reducing symptoms of breathlessness



High side lying – rolled slightly forward
A pillow between your knees may make you more comfortable



Sitting leaning forward
Relax your arms on your thigh:



Standing leaning forward
against a support



Sitting at a table
Lean forward with your chest and head supported



Sitting back
Relax your arms



Standing leaning back, against a wall, with your feet slightly apart and away from the wall

Air flow

Air flow helps to stimulate receptors in our skin that can help to reduce the sensation of breathlessness.

Try to increase the air flow over your skin and combine this with a position of ease for increased benefit. You could do this by sitting by an open window in the breeze or outside in the garden.

Previous advice has been to make use of a fan to promote air flow over the skin. However, with regards to the use of static / hand held fans, current Government advice is that they circulate coronavirus around the room and therefore their use should be avoided at present.

Abdominal / diaphragmatic breathing

When we are feeling breathless we tend to 'over-breathe' and begin to perform what we call 'chest-breathing'.

This is when we use the accessory muscles, in between our ribs, to control breathing and the rise and fall of the breath is at the chest.

If we consistently use this method of breathing, then we increase stress and tension in the body and this increases the feelings of breathlessness.

The most efficient method of bringing air into the lungs is through 'abdominal / diaphragmatic breathing'. This is when we use the diaphragm to control our breathing and the rise and fall is over the abdomen.

This is a more relaxing method of breathing but does require practice. It is helpful to practice when you are not feeling breathless, as this makes it easier to employ when you are experiencing periods of increased breathlessness.

- Sit in a supportive chair with your feet flat on the floor or lie flat on the bed
- Relax your shoulders and chest
- Place a hand on your chest and a hand on your tummy

- ♥ Breathe through your nose or mouth, whichever is most comfortable
- ♥ Focus on your breathing and note the rhythm and speed of it
- ♥ Now, focus on the hand on your tummy and notice how it rises when you breathe in and relaxes when you breathe out
- ♥ The hand on your chest should hardly move at all; if it is moving then try to relax and control your breathing
- ♥ The only hand moving should be that on your tummy
- ♥ Focus on drawing air down into your abdomen
- ♥ Find the natural rest between breaths and pause there for a moment before inhaling
- ♥ Don't rush your breaths

Breathing techniques

There are several other breathing techniques that are of use:

Pursed lip breathing

- ♥ Breathe in through your nose
- ♥ Gently blow the air out through pursed lips until breathing returns to normal

Blow as you go

- ♥ This is used whilst completing an activity
- ♥ Breathe in gently through the nose before moving
- ♥ Breathe out through pursed lips whilst moving

Flopping

- ♥ When you are feeling breathless, try to relax as many muscles as possible and let them 'flop'
- ♥ Lean forward with your hands on your knees, as this increases your lung volume and helps with reducing breathlessness
- ♥ Carry out pursed lip breathing whilst in this position

Focus on the out breath

- ♥ If we consistently focus on the in breath and keep taking more and more breaths to 'get more air in', our lungs become full and our breathing is no longer efficient

- ♥ Focussing on the out breath ensures you empty your lungs and helps to reduce feelings of breathlessness
- ♥ The out breath should be longer than the in breath

Activity

It is important to maintain our activity levels even when we are feeling breathless; this helps us to avoid becoming deconditioned and helps to manage breathlessness.

Aim for around 15-20 minutes of exercise per day; this can be broken down into small chunks of activity rather than completing it all at once.

You can start slowly with seated exercises and stretches and build up to walking around your home and eventually walking outside.

Remember to pace yourself and take regular breaks.

It is perfectly normal to feel tired after activity but if you are still feeling tired a couple of days later then you need to adjust your activity levels down and build again slowly.

It is also normal to feel breathless during activity; it shows that you are challenging your body. However, if you are unable to speak then you need to reduce the intensity of the activity.

Listen to your body and adjust activity accordingly.

Remember to save energy for the activities that are most important to your quality of life.

The link between anxiety and breathlessness

Breathlessness and anxiety are closely linked and each can trigger the other, as you can see from this scenario:

- ♥ You begin to feel breathless
- ♥ You start to have upsetting thoughts like “I can’t breathe”, “I am going to die”
- ♥ You begin to feel anxious and panicked

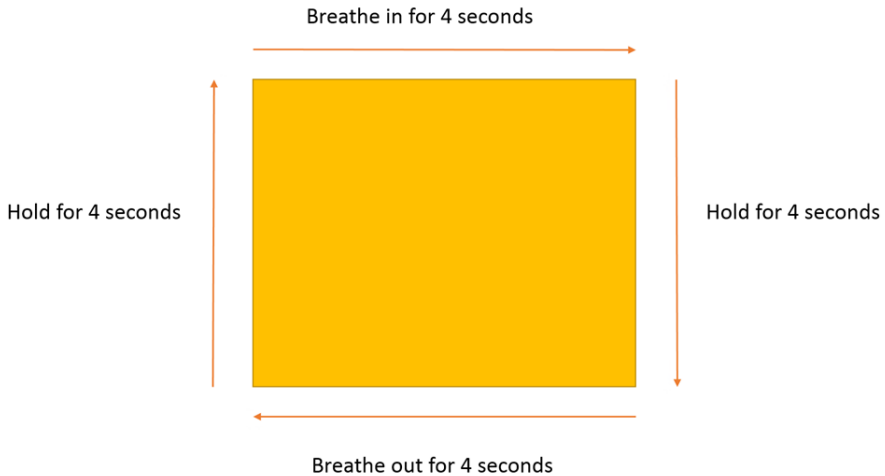
- ♥ You experience physical changes such as your chest tightening and an increased breathing rate
- ♥ This then makes you feel more breathless
- ♥ The cycle continues

There are some useful techniques that you can employ when your breathlessness triggers anxiety, to help you feel calm and control your breathing again.

Square breathing

This technique involves visualising the shape of a square to help regulate your breathing.

Visualise the square in your mind as below:



It can help to trace the outline of the square with your finger to focus. Repeat this until your breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

The calming hand

This is a useful grounding technique to overcome anxiety and bring your breathing back to a normal rhythm.

Use the picture as a guide to follow the steps and hold your fingers as you go to provide a point of focus:

Step 1: Recognition

- ♥ Hold your thumb firmly, recognise that you are feeling anxious and/or breathless

Step 2: Sigh out

- ♥ This relaxes your shoulders and upper chest

Step 3: Inhale gently

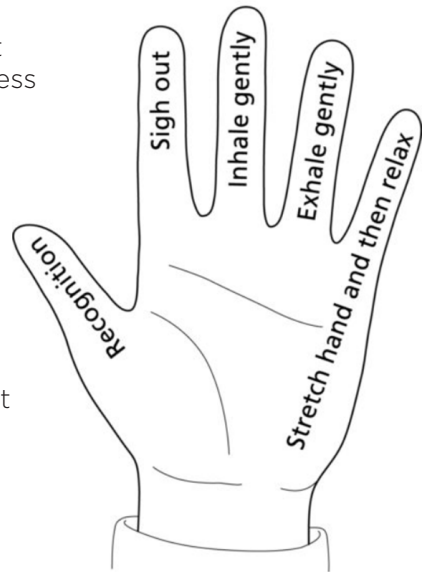
- ♥ Take a slow and relaxed breath in

Step 4: Exhale gently

- ♥ Breathe out gently; try to make the out breath longer than the in breath

Step 5: Stretch hand and then relax

- ♥ Stretching your hand helps to alleviate feelings of panic



Continue to complete the cycle until your anxiety subsides and your breathing returns to a normal rhythm.

Grounding technique

A quick and useful way to remove focus from anxious thoughts is to employ grounding techniques.

Try this exercise:

- ♥ Focus on your breathing; notice the breath coming in and out
- ♥ Then shift your focus to the environment around you
- ♥ Identify five things that you can see
- ♥ Identify four things you can touch
- ♥ Identify three things you can hear
- ♥ Identify two things you can smell
- ♥ Identify one thing you can taste

Using a technique like this brings your focus onto your surroundings and can help to remove feelings of anxiety.

Visualisation

Another anxiety management technique is to try visualisation exercises. There are various exercises you can trial but this is a useful progressive muscle relaxation exercise:

- ♥ Lie down comfortably on your bed / sit comfortably in a chair with both feet on the floor
- ♥ Close your eyes
- ♥ Turn your focus to your feet. Notice how your toes and feet are feeling, whether they are tense or relaxed. As you focus on them, imagine the muscles in your feet and toes are switching off, ready for relaxing
- ♥ Now focus on your lower legs. Again notice whether there is any tension and make note of that. Then imagine switching off the muscles in your legs, so that they become relaxed
- ♥ Now focus on your thighs. Again notice any points of tension and then imagine the muscles gently switching off, removing the tension
- ♥ Now focus on your hips. Again notice whether there is any tension and gently make note of it. Then imagine your muscles are switching off and relaxing
- ♥ Now focus on your abdomen. Again notice any areas of tension and make note of them. Then imagine gently switching off the muscles so that they become relaxed
- ♥ Now focus on your arms. Again notice whether there is any tension and where that is throughout your arms and hands. Imagine the muscles in your hands and arms gently switching off and relaxing
- ♥ Finally focus on your head and neck. Again notice any areas of tension. Then imagine the muscles slowly switching off and relaxing
- ♥ Take a moment to notice the feeling of complete relaxation as you sink into the chair / bed
- ♥ When you are ready, open your eyes

It may be helpful to record yourself reading this script so that you can play it back to yourself. This will allow you to fully focus on gently switching off your muscles until you are feeling completely relaxed.

As with any exercise, it can take practice to achieve the feeling of relaxation, so try to repeat it regularly.

About Saint Francis Hospice

Saint Francis Hospice provides care 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to local people affected by life-limiting illnesses. As a registered charity, we rely on the financial support of our community to keep providing world class care free of charge to individuals and their families. Every year, we provide treatment, care and support to more than 4,000 local people affected by a life-limiting illness.

Confidentiality

At Saint Francis Hospice we are committed to upholding your rights to confidentiality and protecting your privacy. We will treat your information with respect. Keep it secure and comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018 including GDPR. Our privacy notice is available on request or by visiting our website www.sfh.org.uk

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