

A Practical Guide to Breathlessness

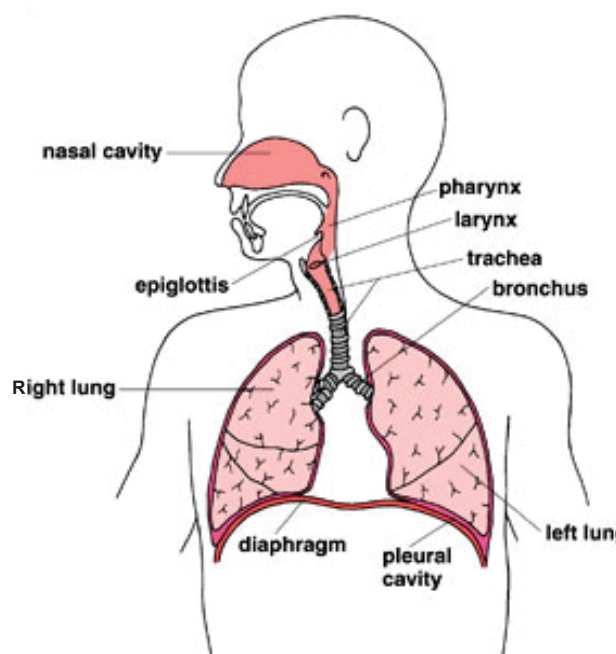


Physiotherapy Department

This booklet is designed to give you some general advice and hints to help with managing breathlessness.

Breathing and the Lungs

When you breathe, air is taken into your lungs through your mouth and nose via a series of branching tubes that end in small sac-like structures called alveoli. Oxygen from the air is then absorbed into your body, enabling it to function properly. Diseases that cause breathlessness frequently involve blockage or narrowing of these passageways within the lungs.



Natural responses to becoming breathless

Often when you become breathless, you will automatically start to:

- Breathe with your shoulders and upper chest
- Breathe more quickly
- Feel frightened, anxious or panicked

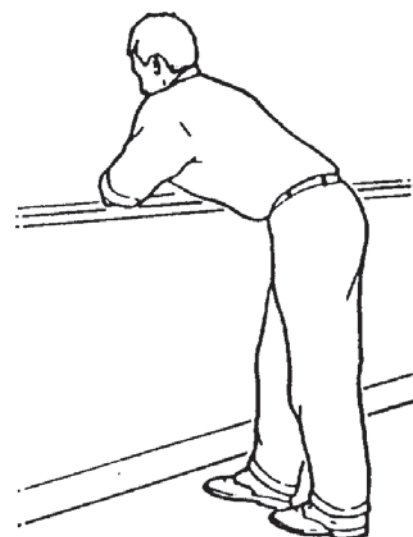
Your body is trying to increase the amount of oxygen it is receiving, and although these responses are natural, they can make the sensation of breathlessness and anxiety worse.

Strategies for Coping with Breathlessness

The following strategies may help you to cope and feel more in control when you become breathless. You should practise these techniques when you are not breathless, so that they become a habit and can be used when you are feeling breathless.

1. Find a Comfortable Position

Try to be supported so that your shoulders and upper chest can relax. This allows your diaphragm and abdomen to expand. Here are some examples of positions which may be comfortable for you:



2. Pursed-lip breathing

- Breathe in slowly through your nose (or nose and mouth). When you exhale, put your lips together as if you are slowly blowing out a candle.
- Make your 'out breath' twice as long as your 'in breath' to empty all the old air from your lungs before taking in new air.
- Repeat for a minute or two, or as long as you feel comfortable.



3. Breathing with your lower chest

Place one hand lightly on your upper chest and one on your abdomen. Notice which moves the most as you breathe in and out. The muscles working in your upper chest as you breathe are called accessory muscles. The muscle working in your abdomen as you breathe is called the diaphragm. To reduce the work of breathing, and get more air into your lungs, you need to use your diaphragm more than your accessory muscles. Therefore, your abdomen should move more than your upper chest as you breathe.



At first, it is best to practice the following exercise either sitting in a comfortable armchair or propped up in bed.

- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel your abdomen rise under your hand.
- Breathe out as gently as possible like a sigh, feel your abdomen relax.
- Avoid holding your breath or taking a bigger breath than normal. Your shoulders and upper chest should be relaxed and not moving. Repeat this exercise about 5 to 10 times.

Once you are able to carry this out you don't need to place your hands on your upper chest or abdomen. You can use abdominal breathing to control your breath as you are carrying out activities that make you breathless.

4. Relaxing shoulders and upper chest muscles

When you breathe out normally, your shoulder and upper chest relaxes – consciously try to maintain this when you breathe in as well as out. If you cannot feel the difference, ask another person to press down gently on your shoulders to relieve some of the tension. Practice relaxing your shoulder and upper chest muscles whenever you breathe.



5. Relaxation and distraction techniques

Relaxing your body and mind can help to relieve breathlessness. Try to remember to stay calm and relaxed by concentrating on controlling your breathing. Find out what works best for you, for example:

- Close your eyes
- Imagine a relaxing place in your mind
- Listen to relaxing music

6. Breathe clean, cool air

If feeling breathless, try opening a window, using a fan or using a humidifier to create a gentle flow of air. Good ventilation with low humidity may help to relieve breathlessness.

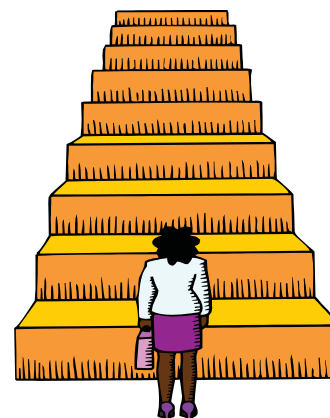
Helpful Hints

1. Pace your activities

- Plan your day so you use your energy on the activities that are most important to you first.
- Take rest breaks in between activities if you become breathless.

2. Use controlled breathing technique during activities

- Use lower chest breathing while you walk, climb stairs or do any activity that makes you breathless.
- Try to match the rate of your breathing with your walking pace. E.g. while climbing stairs, breathe in on the first step and out on the next two steps. Your breathing should remain comfortable and it should take you less time to recover once you're finished.



3. Tips for bending

Bending over from the waist can make you breathless. To reduce this:

- Ease yourself into a crouching position, keeping your back straight and bending from the knees, rather than from the waist.
- Keep your chest upright and your shoulders back – which makes breathing more comfortable.
- Have something secure to hold onto such as a table or sofa to make it easier to crouch down and stand back up again.
- If you need to work at a level below your waist (e.g. emptying the washing machine or a cupboard, or whilst gardening), sit down using a low stool rather than bend.

4. Quitting smoking

If you smoke, try to quit. Cigarettes contain over 4,000 different chemicals which caused both short and long term damage to the body, especially the lungs. Smoking increases the risk of developing Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, asthma and lung cancer – all of which lead to breathlessness. In one to nine months post quitting smoking, coughing, breathlessness and fatigue decrease. Stopping smoking also reduces the rates of chest infection, risk of cancer and heart disease. Tips for successful quitting:

- Have a quit plan
- Use a mix of methods
- Get support (e.g. speak to a Quitline counsellor, join a support group)
- Stay as a non-smoker once you have quit

5. Staying Active

Exercise promotes air exchange and helps to maintain your optimal level of functioning. Walking, swimming or light aerobic activity may also help you to lose weight and feel better. Your physiotherapist may refer you to a local pulmonary rehabilitation service, or design an exercise program to suit your needs.

ABNORMAL BREATHLESSNESS

Although you may notice a gradual increase in your breathlessness over time, sudden increases accompanied by coughing up phlegm and having a temperature may be signs of a chest infection. If periods of breathlessness do not settle within a time frame that is normal for you, see your doctor.

Please ask to speak to a physiotherapist if you would like further information about breathing exercises, advice on breathlessness or phlegm clearance techniques.

For further information contact:

Physiotherapy Department

Phone: (07) 3176 2401

Hours: Monday – Friday, 8 am to 4:30 pm

Information also available from:

Asthma Queensland

Freecall: 1800 278 462

Website: <http://www.asthmaqld.org.au/>

Cancer Australia

Website: <http://canceraustralia.gov.au/>

Lung Cancer Network Australia

Website: <http://lungcancernetwork.com.au/>

Queensland Cancer Council

Helpline: 131 120 (8 AM – 6 PM, Monday – Friday)

Website: <http://www.cancerqld.org.au/>

Smoking Quitline:

Quitline: 13 78 48 (7 AM – 10 PM, Monday – Sunday)

Website: <http://www.quitnow.gov.au/>

The Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia

Phone: 1800 646 690 (National Toll Free)

Website: <http://www.asbestosdiseases.org.au/>

The Australian Lung Foundation

Phone: 1800 654 301

Website: www.lungfoundation.com.au/

