

Breathlessness Support Service

Managing breathlessness

This information sheet helps you manage your long-term breathlessness. If your breathing is getting worse or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, it is important to seek medical advice from your GP.

How are you breathing?

Make yourself aware of how you are breathing:

- When you breathe in, are you tensing your shoulders to lift your chest up?
- To exhale, do you force the air out?
- Are you breathing very rapidly?
- When you need to move, do you find yourself holding your breath?

What can I do to help my breathlessness?

Relax

When you are feeling breathless you may automatically start to use your chest, shoulder and neck muscles, hoping it will make breathing easier. These muscles are not meant to work continuously for long periods of time, so they will soon become tense, sore and tired.

If you can relax and rest these muscles while still getting the breaths you need, it will help to make you feel more comfortable and less distressed. The following steps will help you to achieve a more relaxed way of breathing.

Getting relaxed

Feel which areas of your body are tensed up, and try to loosen them. For example, unclench your jaw, let your shoulders relax and drop down. It helps if you or a relative can massage these areas of tension. Your physiotherapist can advise you how to do this. Relaxation CDs and tapes can also be very helpful; please ask if you would like to try one.

Abdominal or tummy breathing

This is a more relaxed way of breathing which is very efficient and less tiring than using your upper chest, neck and shoulder muscles. The BSS physiotherapist will also demonstrate it.

- With your shoulders relaxed, rest one hand gently on your stomach (just above your tummy button).

- Keep your shoulders relaxed and heavy, allow your hand to rise gently as you breathe in and out through your nose. It may help to imagine air filling your stomach like a balloon.
- Gently sigh the air out through your mouth.
- If your nose is blocked, breathe in and out through your mouth and discuss with your doctor how to unblock it.

Slow down

When you are comfortable with the abdominal breathing, try to slow down the speed of your breathing. Remember that when you slow down, your breathing becomes deeper, which is more efficient.

Follow these tips to reduce the feeling of breathlessness

A draught of air across your face, from a handheld fan or an open window, may reduce the feeling of breathlessness, but avoid very cold air. Cooling your face with cold water may also help.

Positioning

Your physiotherapist will discuss with you which positions of relaxation are suitable for you. These positions are available on positions to ease Breathlessness Support Service fact sheet four.

How active should I be?

It is important to stay as active as you can. This will prevent your muscles becoming weaker.

How to make your life easier

At home

- Keep things you use often downstairs and close to hand.
- Have a phone point close to your bed or armchair.
- Consider using a trolley or carrier bag for shopping.
- Plan your chores or daily activities, such as bathing or shaving, to make sure you have everything you need before you start.
- Spread your tasks throughout the day.
- Keep yourself active and independent, but do rest between activities and whenever you feel you are starting to get too breathless.

Walking and climbing stairs

- Pace your breathing to your steps; breathe in over one step, breathe out over the next two steps.
- Move at a comfortable pace, and breathe steadily. Avoid holding your breath or trying to move too fast.
- Use walking aids if they help you. You can discuss this with your Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist.
- Stop and rest whenever you need to.
- Have rest points at the top and bottom of the stairs and remember to count your breathing.

- Use the handrail when climbing stairs, take the steps slowly and stop to rest when you feel the need to.

Eating and drinking

- Take small meals often, rather than one large one.
- Eat smaller mouthfuls.
- Avoid foods that are difficult to chew, add sauces when possible.
- Drink sips of fluid often to avoid becoming dehydrated.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this information, please discuss these with either your BSS Physiotherapist or Occupational therapist during one of your home visits.

Acknowledgement

This document has been reproduced and adapted from the patient information leaflets used at Addenbrooke's Hospital as part of their Breathlessness Intervention Service with the permission of Dr Sara Booth, MD, FRCP (Macmillan Consultant in Palliative Medicine, Clinical Director Palliative Care and Associate Lecturer, University of Cambridge).