

# Breathlessness Support Service

---

## Breathlessness information and commonly asked questions

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.

### Is being breathless harming me?

Breathlessness is not harmful, but it is very unpleasant and frightening. It is important for you to remain as active as your illness allows you to be. This information sheet will help you to manage your breathlessness.

### Is there anything I can do to stop myself feeling frightened?

It is very common for people who are breathless to feel frightened and anxious. These feelings can make your breathing worse. It is important to remind yourself that breathlessness is not in itself dangerous. There are techniques which you can use to help reduce anxiety and control it. These include relaxation, positioning and breathing exercises. You can find out more about these techniques from the BSS physiotherapist, and a summary of these techniques are provided on our **Managing Breathlessness** information sheet.

### What else can I do to help with my breathlessness?

**Cool air** - cooling your face with cold air or water reduces the feeling of breathlessness. You can use a small hand held or standing fan, or simply a cool draught from an open window. You may prefer to use a cold flannel.

**Plan** - a very important part of controlling breathlessness is to plan your activities. Decide your priorities and try not to do too much at once or in any one day. Some activities may fill you with dread as you know they are particularly difficult for you. In these cases try to ask for help. This may be frustrating for you, but will allow you to conserve your energy for the things that are important to you and help your confidence.

**Pace** - allow plenty of time and take breaks when you need them. Activity may increase your feeling of breathlessness but this is normal. With any activity that you find difficult, such as going upstairs, it is important that you feel in control of your breathing before you start.

Pace yourself so that you do not become too breathless. Try to arrange furniture in convenient places to rest, such as an extra chair in the bathroom or hallway. Tasks involving carrying or bending are often very difficult, and you should ask for help or advice with these. You may also find it helpful to arrange your house so that items that you use often are kept within easy reach.

If you are going out know where you can rest and if possible take someone with you to carry the bags! There are many good booklets available with more information – please ask for details. Remember, it is important to **be as active as you can**.

### **Are there any drugs that may help my breathlessness?**

There are three main families of drugs used to help breathlessness. The most commonly used drugs from these groups are:

(a) **Prednisolone** or **Dexamethasone** (which are steroids): you may have already taken steroids for another condition as they are commonly used in medicine. Your doctor can advise you on how to take them.

(b) **Morphine**: we usually think of morphine as a drug to treat pain, but it can also be very helpful for breathlessness. You will need a much smaller dose and sometimes you will take it less frequently than when used for pain relief.

(c) **Diazepam**: diazepam, also called Valium, is usually used to treat anxiety, but it can also help breathlessness. It is usually prescribed at night as it can make you sleepy. The doctor will often start with a low dose, building up to a higher dose depending on how it suits you.

### **Will oxygen help me?**

Oxygen may help breathlessness in some people, but it does not help everyone. While you are here, we will try to find out if you respond well to oxygen. If you do, we will talk to your family doctor and see if you can have it at home. If you do not find it useful, it will not be prescribed.

If you find oxygen helpful you can use it at anytime. Some people use it when they know they are going to be busy, such as just before they prepare to walk upstairs, or just before walking up the road. Other people like to use it now and again when they have become breathless.

Please also find below a list of useful publications and contact details for your information.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this information, please discuss these with either Professor Moxham or Professor Higginson at one of your clinic visits.

Organisation	Publication	Address	Tel number	Website
Macmillan cancer support	Relax and breathe relaxation CD or audiotape for people experiencing breathlessness (Free)	89 Albert Embankment London SE1 7UQ	0808 808 2020	www.macmillan.org.uk
Macmillan cancer support	Coping with shortness of breath (Free)	89 Albert Embankment London SE1 7UQ	0808 808 2020	www.macmillan.org.uk
Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation	A practical guide to breathlessness (Free)	Enterprise Way Wavertree Technology Park Liverpool, Merseyside L13 1FB	0800 358 7200	www.roycastle.org
Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation	Take a breather video patient guide (£5 charge)	Enterprise Way Wavertree Technology Park Liverpool, Merseyside L13 1FB	0800 358 7200	www.roycastle.org
NHS	Various		111	
British Lung Foundation	Various (free +/- donation)	73-75 Goswell Road London EC1V 7ER	020 7688 5555	www.blf.org.uk
British Heart Foundation	Various (Free +/- donation)	Greater London House 180 Hampstead Road London NW7 7AW	0870 600 6566	www.bhf.org.uk

## 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).