St Elizabeth Hospice

Coping with breathlessness

This leaflet provides information for people with a limiting illness about how to cope when suffering from breathlessness. There are also some tips to help you avoid becoming breathless.

Breathlessness can affect all areas of your life and make you feel anxious. However, it is important to remember that being breathless is not harmful.

Managing everyday activities
Try to remember the following basic principles to manage your breathlessness:
Plan ahead
Think through your daily activities and try to plan what you need to do and when.
Prioritise
Delegate some household chores and tasks to others if possible, such as shopping or housework. Try to conserve your energy for specific activities, and for things you enjoy.
Pace yourself
Intersperse periods of activity with periods of rest.

Breathing Control
Breathing control is the name given to a method of gentle breathing using the lower part of your chest whilst leaving your upper chest and shoulders relaxed. This helps by:

- Making breathing easier and allowing energy to be used more effectively
- Relieving breathlessness
- Encouraging your breathing pattern to be more normal
- Improving ventilation of the lower part of the lungs.

How to control your breathing
1. Settle yourself in a relaxed position, such as sitting in a chair
2. Make sure that your back is well supported
3. Rest your hand on your lower rib/upper abdomen
4. Keep your upper chest and shoulders relaxed
5. Breathe in gently through your nose and out through your mouth, feeling the expansion in your lower chest under your hand as you breathe in
6. Remember that breathing out is just as important as breathing in - imagine you are blowing out a candle

If you practice breathing control often for short periods of time, it will become much easier.

When you become breathless, try to breathe as gently as possible using this method. Breathe at your own rate, but as you begin to gain control, slowly try and bring your breathing rate back down to normal.

Use breathing control if you are feeling anxious, and to help you manage everyday activities such as getting dressed, climbing stairs, bathing etc.

Avoid holding your breath.

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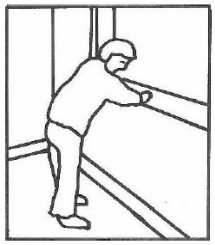
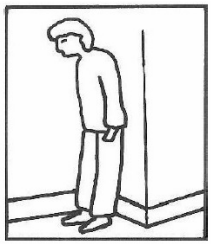
Positioning
There are several positions that can be used to ease your breathlessness. Each position will help you to relax your shoulders and upper chest. You can then practice the breathing control method described.

Standing leaning forwards
Stand leaning forwards with your arms resting on a ledge, such as a window sill, bench or banister rail.

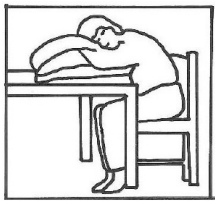


Standing leaning backwards
Alternatively, stand leaning backwards against a wall, with your shoulders relaxed and your arms
resting down by your sides. Your feet should be slightly apart, and about 30cm/ 12” from the wall.

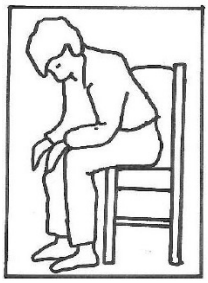


Relaxed sitting
Sit back on a chair, with your arms relaxed and your hands resting comfortably on your thighs.

Sitting at a table
Place one or two pillows on a table, sit on a chair and lean forward at the hips, supporting your head and upper chest on the pillows.



Sitting leaning forwards
Sit on a chair and lean forwards with your arms resting on your thighs and your wrists relaxed.



Relaxation
It can be very beneficial to learn a relaxation technique. Combined with breathing control, it will help you feel less anxious and more in control when you are breathless.

To help with relaxation, you may like to try the following:

- A relaxation tape or CD
- Listen to some relaxing music
- Concentrate on a favourite object, such as a painting or other piece of art
- Imagine you are in a favourite place which you find relaxing, and build up a picture of that place in your mind, including smells and sounds

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Useful tips to help avoid becoming breathless

- Avoid bending from the waist, as this can cause breathlessness.
- Use a pick-up stick (available from your physiotherapist or occupational therapist) to pick up any items which are on the floor, to avoid bending from the waist.
- Use breathing control if you become breathless when walking or climbing the stairs. Try matching your steps with your breathing, such as breathing in on the first step and out on the next two. Practice and find a comfortable pace for your breathing.
- Try to avoid rushing. Pace yourself and think ahead, allowing time for you to rest between activities. Remember to allow time and energy for things you enjoy doing.
- Eating can be hard if you are breathless. Try taking smaller meals or snacks more often. Take smaller mouthfuls and avoid foods that are difficult to chew. Keep a drink by you so you can sip it during the day.
- If talking makes you breathless, try to use short sentences and pause for breath in between.
- A cool draught, such as from an open window or fan, can be beneficial when you are feeling breathless.
- A wheelchair may help with energy conservation, and can be requested from your occupational therapist or physiotherapist.
- Your occupational therapist can help by advising you about equipment that you can install in your home that may help prevent you becoming breathless, such as raised toilet seats, perching stools in the kitchen, or grab rails in the bathroom.
- If possible, sit down when showering and to get dried and dressed.
- Sit as much as possible when preparing food.

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