

Patient information factsheet

Controlling your breathing when feeling breathless

This information sheet describes a technique that may help you to control or manage your breathing when you feel 'out of breath' or when breathing is difficult.

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness is the feeling of being out of breath. During illness it can occur at a much lower level of physical exertion than normally expected; even crossing a room slowly can be a struggle. Living with breathlessness can be an emotional and physical challenge.

When you start to feel out of breath or your breathing is difficult after light exercise such as walking, it's important that you tell your doctor so that they can find out what might be causing you to be breathless and ensure you receive the right care and treatment. They may also suggest a referral to other professionals such as physiotherapists and occupational therapists, **who can advise you on how to manage your breathlessness better and to ensure your ability to carry out activities of daily living is not being compromised.**

Ways to cope when you are breathless involve helping you to understand the changes you are experiencing with your breathing and include relaxation; looking at ways for you to pace any activity; and practical ways for you to control your breathing.

What is breathing control?

- A method of taking normal breaths.
- A slower, controlled breathing that does not involve taking deeper breaths.
- Using the lower chest whilst keeping the upper chest and shoulders relaxed.

Why it is used

- To reduce the effort of breathing.
- To obtain a sense of control over breathing. It works well when you feel 'out of breath' or when breathing is difficult.
- To improve the efficiency of all respiratory muscles.
- To improve exercise tolerance during activities such as walking and climbing stairs.

How it is performed

It is important when learning the techniques to try to find a place that is quiet so that you can practise without interruptions and to make sure you are in a comfortable, well supported position - for example, sitting or high sided lying. See figures 1 and 2 overleaf.

Before starting, give a good sigh out through your mouth as this will automatically make your shoulders and neck muscles relax if they are tense. While keeping your shoulders relaxed, follow the steps overleaf:

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- Place your hand lightly on your upper chest and the other on your abdomen just below where the ribs divide.
- Take a normal breath in through your nose and feel the hand on your abdomen rise up and out.
- Now breathe out quietly through your mouth and feel the hand on your abdomen sink down and in. The hand on your upper chest should hardly move.
- Breathe at a rate that is comfortable for you.
- Now, when breathing, try to make your breathing out last twice as long as when you are breathing in (it will help to count slowly as you breathe in and out).

Practising the technique will help you to feel confident with it and will help when you are having breathing difficulties. It is therefore important to practise five minutes at least two to three times a day, at a time when you feel relaxed.

Don't worry if you can't achieve this technique at first; keep practising and in time you will be able to master it. The more you practise the easier it will be for you to control your breathing when you feel out of breath.

You might find the following positions comfortable when practising. They are also comfortable positions to try when you're feeling breathless.



Figure 1. Sitting



Figure 2. High-sided lying



Figure 3. Relaxed sitting



Figure 4. Relaxed standing



Figure 5. Forward-lean sitting



Figure 6. Forward-lean standing

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Breathing control while walking

During exercise, it's normal to increase your breathing rate, but try not to alter the pattern. If necessary, breathe in and out of your mouth. Avoid the temptation to hold your breath whilst walking. It may be helpful to breathe rhythmically in time with your steps. For example, breathe OUT for two steps and IN for one step, or, breathe OUT for three steps and IN for two steps. Do whichever is most comfortable.

Further information

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