

# BREATHLESSNESS AND ME

Severn Hospice Breathlessness Service. Patient information pack

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There are five fact files in this pack. Each one is about a different topic relevant to you and your breathlessness. They are designed to help you manage your symptoms and take control.

## Some commonly asked questions

### Q. What is breathlessness and is it harmful?

Breathlessness is a normal experience and is expected when we exert ourselves. Some people have medical conditions, which mean they get short of breath more easily eg COPD, pulmonary fibrosis or heart failure.

Being breathless does not harm you but it can be an unpleasant feeling. It can sometimes make you feel anxious and frightened.

### Q. Is there anything I can do to stop myself feeling so anxious when I get breathless?

Yes. There are lots of things eg relaxation techniques, breathing methods and positions and using a hand held fan. These will be covered in other fact files. Your doctor may also prescribe medication to help you too.

### Q. Do I need to have oxygen?

No, not necessarily. A few people may need oxygen to be prescribed by their doctor but most people will find other things more helpful.

### Q. What other things should I think about?

- If you smoke try and quit. All GP surgeries and hospital clinics can put you in touch with trained counsellors to help with this. Or you can get more information from [www.nhs.uk/Livewell/smoking](http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/smoking)
- Get a flu jab every year
- Eat a healthy diet and take some regular activity or exercise. Being physically active when you are breathless is more challenging but not impossible, every little helps and can actually help with your symptoms
- Take the medication prescribed by your doctor for your condition and tell them if you are not so good so they can help you

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## Energy conservation or the 4 P's

We all have different energy levels. We need different amounts depending on what we are doing. It is important not to waste energy and to use what you do have in the best way possible.

- P PLAN**  
Space out activities through the day and week and don't give yourself too much to do.  
Example – if you are making a meal, get all the things together before you start, in one place.
- P PRIORITISE**
  - Work out what is important and what isn't
  - Write things down in a list if this helps
  - Maybe give some jobs to other people
- P PACING**
  - Don't rush things
  - Allow extra time
  - Slow down when eating or talking
  - Maybe allow someone to help you dress or wash
  - Take regular rests and don't overdo things so you get exhausted
  - Example – use a towelling bathrobe instead of a towel to dry after a bath. This saves energy and in the long run, time
- P POSITIONING**
  - Organise your home so that things are easy to reach/get
  - Avoid excessive bending, turning, twisting
  - Have chairs that are easy to get up from – an occupational therapist can help you with this.
  - Sit down to wash
  - If you feel breathless or need a rest, lean forward, rest on some pillows or a table top – think about athletes at the end of a running race and how they stand: bent over slightly hands on legs. This leaning forward helps you recover from feeling breathless
  - Sleep on your side with a pillow for support

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## The hand-held fan

Using a hand-held fan can help you recover from episodes of breathlessness. Hand-held fans are inexpensive, battery-operated devices that fit easily into a pocket or bag.

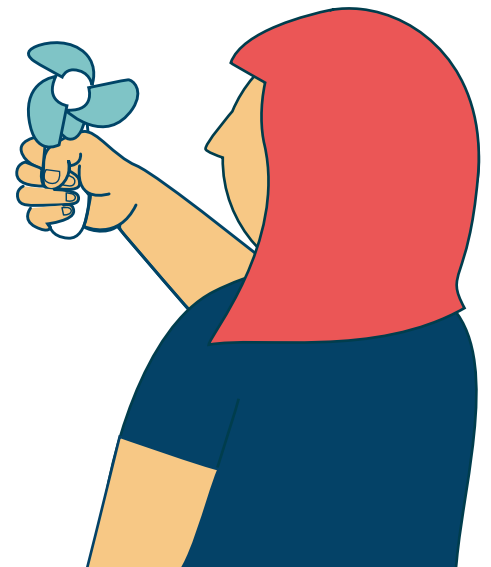
### Q. How do I use one?

Switch on the fan and hold it about 6-8 inches from your face, allowing the draught of air to blow onto the middle of your face around the mouth and nose area. Hold it there for a few minutes and you will start to feel less short of breath.

### Q. Is there anything else I can use?

Yes

- Larger fans that stand on the floor or sit on a surface
- Place a cool flannel on your face
- Spray a fine water mist on your face
- Open a window and lean out



## TIP

You can have several fans around the house, in coat pockets, in the car, shed or greenhouse etc

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## Breathing exercises

### Q. How do we get air in and out of our lungs?

There are two groups of muscles that help you breathe.

#### The diaphragm

This is a sheet of muscle at the bottom of our rib cage. This flattens as we breathe in and rises in a dome shape when we breathe out. The diaphragm works tirelessly all the time, without stopping.

#### The accessory muscles

These are found in your neck and shoulders and usually move our head and arms, but they can also help stretch our ribs to help suck air into our lungs. We use these when we are short of breath. These muscles get tired if used a lot and can then feel tight and stiff.

There are three types of breathing to mention which are relevant to people who experience breathlessness.

#### 1. Breathing control

#### 2. Pursed lip breathing (PLB)

#### 3. Recovery or rescue breathing

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### Breathing control

This is something to practice but it doesn't come easily to everyone so don't worry if you find it hard to learn.

#### Q. How do I start?

- Place a hand on your tummy
- Relax your upper body – let your shoulders lower
- As you breathe in, push your tummy out – feel your hand rise
- Take in as much air as you need – no more
- Breathe out, relax, let your tummy fall

Your breath out should take longer than your breath in, with every breath out try and relax your upper body a bit more each time.

## TIPS

Watch your pet sleeping, they tend to breathe like this. Imagine being in a little boat at sea, with each gentle wave you rise up then fall back down and wait for the next one.  
RISE • RELAX • REST

Try breathing like this now.

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## 2 Pursed lip breathing

This means narrowing your lips as you breathe out. This makes your breathing feel easier.

### Q. How do I do this?

- It's like blowing a candle so that it flickers
- Or blowing a kiss

## 3 Recovery or rescue breathing

This is for when you are more breathless than usual and feeling a bit puffed.

How do I do this? **The three Fs**

- **F**an – get this aimed at your face
- **F**orward lean – lean forward, or rest on something leaning forward e.g. a rail, fence, piece of furniture, the back of a chair
- **F**ocus – on your breathing out and try to relax

## TIPS

As you breathe out imagine a wave of calm flowing down from your head over your body – try and focus on this nice feeling.

Some general advice about breathing:

- “Blow as you go” – breathe out on effort eg when you bend over
- Don't hold your breath doing an activity – it won't help
- Don't rush things – it will make you feel worse
- Pace your breathing – when walking, climbing the stairs – count breaths in and out and take a rest every so often
- Picture a rectangle when you breath – it could be a painting, a photograph or simply a window or door frame. Allow your in breath to be the short side of that shape, and your out breath the longer side. Follow the outline of that shape with every two breaths. This will allow you to have a longer breath out which will help with your symptoms.

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## Relaxation

Breathlessness often makes people feel anxious. Anxiety is a normal bodily reaction to lots of things and is important if we are to avoid danger eg a stampeding elephant or out-of-control car. Some of the bodily responses to anxiety are unpleasant and can include sweating, dizziness, palpitations, and a sick feeling. Learning how to manage our anxieties can help us control our breathlessness and relaxation is one way of helping with this.

This factfile will teach you two useful techniques to practice and learn. These need practice and it may help if you do these with a friend to start with. Try with some quiet music in the background too.

### Q. How do I do this?

Get into the right mood:

- Sit or lie down somewhere comfortable and where you won't be disturbed or distracted
- Ensure you feel settled and let your shoulders and arms relax and drop down.
- Close your eyes or focus on something still

### Option A – Visualisation

Imagine a favourite place, somewhere you feel safe, happy and secure and start using your senses to make that scene more real.

- **What can you see?**
- **What can you smell?**
- **What can you touch?**
- **What can you hear?**
- **What can you taste?**

Enjoy all those feelings and experiences. Note how relaxed you are feeling, how comfortable you are. When you are ready, walk away from that scene and enter the real world around you once more. This can take about 5-10min to do, or longer if you prefer.

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## Option B – Body Scan

- Get comfortable
- Close your eyes
- Focus on your feet and squeeze and release the muscles in them

If this causes discomfort then simply imagine doing it

- Now gradually work up your body to your knees, hips then your lower back, tummy, chest
- Squeeze and relax, feel the tension melt away
- Acknowledge each bit of your body in turn
- Squeeze and release these muscle groups
- Think of your breathing, focus on your breath out as you relax
- At the end, remain resting with your eyes closed, breathing rhythmically
- Note how comfortable you feel; you may feel sleepy
- When you are ready open your eyes and come back to the present

This exercise really benefits from some soothing background music. There are many other techniques to help you relax. Some people do sudoku, crosswords or count bricks outside the window. They all require practice and sometimes it takes a few goes to get the hang of it and feel confident.

If you practice relaxation regularly you will be able to use this when you are anxious or breathless and it will help you to regain control more quickly.

## TIPS

- Allow enough time to practice
- Be comfortable before you start and allow enough time 10-15min
- Try different exercises and see what suits you best
- There are lots of resources out there including CDs and online sites which can help with ideas.