

MANAGING BREATHLESSNESS

Breathlessness or “dyspnoea” is the feeling of being out of breath. This can mean that your breathing feels too hard, too fast or just uncomfortable. Patients often describe the sensation in phrases such as “can’t catch my breath” or simply feeling as if they are “suffocating”.



How can it effect me?

Breathlessness can be frightening and disabling and can affect the quality of life not only of the patient but also those most closely involved with them. Different people are able to tolerate different levels of discomfort, and two people with the same condition may experience different degrees of breathlessness.

Breathlessness in itself is not harmful, even though it is very unpleasant, If you can learn to manage your breathlessness, you will be able to continue to do many of the things you enjoy doing.

How can I control it?

The following strategies may assist you to avoid becoming breathless, and to regain control of your breathing, if you do become breathless. Be slow and steady, and stop to rest before you become too breathless.

Plan ahead

Being prepared for the unexpected can allow you to have the confidence to complete tasks, go to work or socialise. By working out tactics for coping with situations you know to be difficult, or make you breathless, you will find they become easier to manage.

Break tasks down

Breaking tasks down into smaller parts reduces the demand you place on your body and allows yourself time to rest and settle your breathing. If possible eliminate or modify parts of the task for greater ease. For example, avoid lifting heavy objects by using a trolley and making more trips with lighter loads.

Have rest periods

Include rest periods throughout the day, but ensure you balance periods of rest with gentle exercise as prolonged rest can result in a rapid drain of energy that can lead to feelings of overwhelming tiredness.

Change the way you perform activities that make you breathless

- Eg. Bending - Avoid bending at the waist: use a crouching position instead
- Dressing - Sit for as much time as possible. Wear loose fitting clothes.
- Talking on the phone - Don't rush for the phone. Talk in short sentences.

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What if I still become breathless

- Find a comfortable position that allows you to breathe more easily.
- If you become breathless, leaning forward may assist in reducing shortness of breath by allowing your diaphragm (the muscle underneath your lungs) to expand fully. Concentrate on relaxing your neck and arm muscles to reduce your use of energy.
- In sitting, lean forward from your hips (with your back straight), resting your forearms on your thighs. Alternatively, you can lean on a few pillows on a table in front of your chair.
- If you are unable to sit down, a similar effect may be achieved by similarly leaning forward on a bench, windowsill or fence.
- Alternatively, leaning against a wall may also provide some relief.
- Use “Relaxed Breathing” techniques:

1. Relax your shoulders

It is common for people to become tense and “hitch” their shoulders when they become short of breath. Relaxing your shoulders allows your lungs to work more effectively to help get your breathing under control.

2. Breath in slowly and quietly

Place your hand lightly on your tummy and feel the gentle relaxed movement as you breath in and out. This helps to ensure your breathing is slow and quiet. Breath through your nose if it is comfortable.

3. Breath out gently

Concentrate on breathing out gently.

Take a few minutes each day when your breathing is feeling comfortable to practice the above techniques.

This will help you to learn to perform them well, and give you the confidence to use them if you do become breathless.

