

Breathlessness Intervention Service

Fact sheet one: Breathlessness: Information and commonly asked questions

The information given below is designed to help you manage your stable 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. Please ask if you would like more information on these or refer to the other fact sheets in this series:

www.addenbrookes.org.uk/patient_visitors/information_leaflets/information_leaflets.htm
or telephone 01223 216032.

What else can I do to help 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 ask for help/advice with these. You may also find it helpful to arrange your house so that items that you use frequently 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 will 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.

For further help and advice contact the Palliative Care Team on 01223 274404, 0900 – 1700 Monday to Friday.

Please also find below a list of national organisations and contact details for your information:

Organisation	Publication	Address	Telephone number	Website
Macmillan cancer relief	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 relief	Coping with shortness of breath (Free)	89 Albert Embankment, London SE1 7UQ	0808 808 2020	www.macmillan.org.uk
Roy Castle Lung Foundation	A practical guide to breathlessness (Free)	200 London Road Liverpool L3 9TA	0800 358 7200	www.roycastle.org
Roy Castle Lung Foundation and University Hospital Birmingham	Take a breather video patient guide (£5 charge)	200 London Road Liverpool L3 9TA	0800 358 7200	www.roycastle.org
NHS Direct	Various		0845 4647	www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk
British Lung Foundation	Various (Free +/- donation)	73-75 Goswell Road London EC1V 7ER	08458 50 50 20	www.britishlungfoundation.org
British Heart Foundation	Various (Free +/- donation) Heart Information Line	14 Fitzhardinge Street London W1H 6DH	020 7935 0185 0845 708070	www.bhf.org.uk



Addenbrooke's is smoke-free. You cannot smoke on site. For advice on quitting, contact your GP or the NHS smoking helpline free, 0800 169 0 169

Please ask if you require this information in other languages, large print or audio format: 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Informacje te można otrzymać w innych językach, w wersji dużym drukiem lub audio. Zamówienia prosimy składać pod numerem: 01223 216032 lub wysyłając e-mail: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Polish

Se precisar desta informação num outro idioma, em impressão de letras grandes ou formato áudio por favor telefone para o 01223 216032 ou envie uma mensagem para: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Portuguese

Если вам требуется эта информация на другом языке, крупным шрифтом или в аудиоформате, пожалуйста, обращайтесь по телефону 01223 216032 или на вебсайт patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Russian

若你需要此信息的其他語言版本、大字體版或音頻格式，請致電 01223 216032 或發郵件到: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Cantonese

Bu bilgiyi diger dillerde veya büyük baskılı ya da sesli formatta isterseniz lütfen su numaradan kontak kurun: 01223 216032 veya asagıdaki adrese e-posta gönderin: patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk

Turkish

এই তথ্য বাংলায়, বড় অক্ষরে বা অডিও টেপে পেতে চাইলে দয়া করে 01223 216032 নম্বরে ফোন করুন বা patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk ঠিকানায় ই-মেইল করুন।

Bengali

Document history			
Authors	Megan Forsdyke, Clinical Specialist Physiotherapist		
Department	Oncology Box 193, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Cambridge CB2 0QQ, www.addenbrookes.nhs.uk		
Contact number	01223 586703		
Published	January 09	Review date	Annual
File name	\\addfile\oncology\Q A\FORMS\PATIENT INFORMATION\PIN734_v3_breathlessness_info.doc		
Version number	3	Ref	PIN734