

Breathlessness Intervention Service

Fact sheet two: Managing breathlessness

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.

How are you breathing?

Make yourself aware of how you are breathing:

- When you breathe in, are you tensing your shoulders to lift your chest up?
- To exhale, do you force the air out?
- Are you breathing very rapidly?
- When you need to move, do you find yourself holding your breath?

What can I do to help my breathlessness?

Relax

- When you are feeling breathless you may automatically start to use your chest, shoulder and neck muscles, hoping it will make breathing easier. These muscles are not meant to work continuously for long periods of time, so they will soon become tense, sore and tired.
- If you can relax and rest these muscles, while still getting the breaths you need, it will help to make you feel more comfortable and less distressed. The following steps will help you to achieve a more relaxed way of breathing.

Getting relaxed

Feel which areas of your body are tensed up, and try to loosen them. For example, unclench your jaw, let your shoulders relax and drop down. It helps if you or a relative can massage these areas of tension. Your physiotherapist will show you how to do this. Relaxation tapes can also be very helpful, please ask if you would like to try one.

Abdominal or tummy breathing

This is a more relaxed way of breathing which is very efficient and less tiring than using your upper chest, neck and shoulder muscles. Your physiotherapist will also demonstrate it.

- With your shoulders relaxed, rest one hand gently on your stomach (just above your tummy button).
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and heavy, allow your hand to rise gently as you breathe in and out through your nose. It may help to imagine air filling your stomach like a balloon.
- Gently sigh the air out through your mouth.

- If your nose is blocked, breathe in and out through your mouth and consider discussing with your doctor how to unblock it.

Slow down

When you are comfortable with the abdominal breathing, try to slow down the speed of your breathing. Remember that when you slow down, your breathing becomes deeper, which is more efficient.

Follow these tips to reduce the feeling of breathlessness

- A draught of air across your face, from a handheld fan or an open window, may reduce the feeling of breathlessness but avoid very cold air.
- Cooling your face with cold water may also help.

Positioning

Your physiotherapist will discuss with you which positions of relaxation are suitable for you. These positions are available on fact sheet four – please see www.addenbrookes.org.uk/patient_visitors/information_leaflets/information_leaflets.htm or telephone 01223 216032.

How active should I be?

It is important to stay as active as you can. This will prevent your muscles becoming weaker.

How to make your life easier

At home

- Keep things you use frequently downstairs and close to hand.
- Have a phone point close to your bed or armchair.
- Consider using a trolley or carrier bag for shopping.
- Plan your chores or daily activities, such as bathing or shaving, to make sure you gather all you need before you start.
- Spread your tasks throughout the day.
- Keep yourself active and independent, but do rest between activities and whenever you feel you are starting to get too breathless.

Walking and climbing stairs

- Pace your breathing to your steps; breathe in over one step, breathe out over the next two steps
- Move at a comfortable pace, and breathe steadily. Avoid holding your breath or trying to move too fast.
- Use walking aids if they help you. You can discuss this with your Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist.
- Stop and rest whenever you need to.
- Have rest points at the top and bottom of the stairs and remember to count your breathing.
- Use the handrail when climbing stairs, take the steps slowly and stop to rest when you feel the need to.

Eating and drinking

- Take frequent small meals, rather than one large one.

- Eat smaller mouthfuls.
- Avoid foods that are difficult to chew, add sauces when possible.
- Drink sips of fluid frequently to avoid becoming dehydrated.

Further information

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



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 2009	Review date	Annual
File name	\\addfile\oncology\Q A\FORMS\PATIENT INFORMATION\PIN735_v3_coping_breathlessness.doc		
Version number	3	Ref	PIN735