
Palliative Care Team

Breathlessness Intervention Service

Fact sheet two: Breathing methods and positions to ease breathlessness

The information given below is designed to help you manage your stable long term breathlessness. If you feel your breathing is getting worse or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, it is important to seek medical advice from your GP.

Muscles involved in breathing

The diaphragm

The main muscle of breathing is the diaphragm. This is a large flat sheet of muscle covering the base of your rib cage. As you breathe in, it moves down to help draw the air into your lungs, pushing your tummy forward as it moves. When you breathe out it relaxes, moving upwards, returning to its natural dome shape and allowing your tummy to rest back in.

The diaphragm muscle does not tire easily and therefore can move up and down all day, every day without getting tired.

The breathing accessory muscles

There are many muscles around your neck and shoulders with the role of moving your neck and arms. However, when you are breathless these muscles can pull on your upper ribs to help you draw air into your lungs. This is a normal response to breathlessness. These muscles are therefore called breathing accessory muscles.

The main role of breathing accessory muscles is to move the neck and arms. They are not designed to be used for long periods, unlike the diaphragm. Therefore long term overuse of these muscles can make them become tight, stiff and sore.

Breathing Control

For mild to moderate breathlessness

How it works

This breathing method aims to make your breathing as efficient as possible by focusing on breathing from your diaphragm. This method also guides you to take in only the air that you need, to avoid any unnecessary effort and to relax and calm your breathing.

When to use

Breathing control may help you recover from mild to moderate breathlessness after activity. It may also help your breathing to settle if you feel breathless or panicky when you are not active. You may wish use this breathing method with the hand held fan.

Breathing control**Preparation**

- Place both hands on your tummy, just above your belly button.
- Relax your shoulders and arms.
- Let your elbows rest in by your sides.

Spend as long as you need on each of the following points:

- Feel the breathing movement under your hands.
 - As you **breathe in**, allow your tummy to **swell**.
 - As you **breathe out**, relax and let your tummy **fall**.
- If possible, breathe **in** through your nose and **out** through your mouth. Narrow your mouth slightly, if it helps.
- **Relax** and **release** each out breath until it comes to its natural end.
- As you breathe out, **relax** your upper chest a little more.
- Breathe in and out **smoothly** and **quietly**; take only the air you need.
- **Pause** as comfortable after each breath out.
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving.

**Recovery breathing method and positions
For severe breathlessness****How they work**

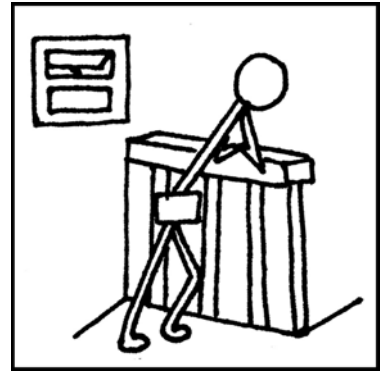
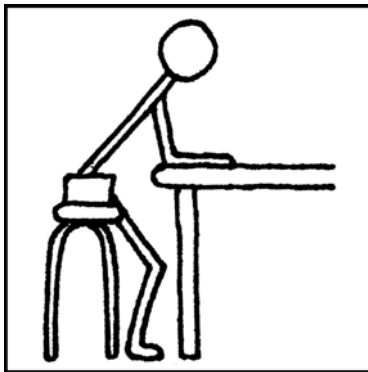
Breathing recovery positions fix the shoulders still to support the breathing accessory muscles so they can pull on your ribs to help draw the air in. Leaning forward may improve the movement of your diaphragm.

The recovery breathing method encourages you to allow time for the air to leave your lungs as you breathe out, therefore creating more room for the next breath in. The aim of recovery breathing is to calm your breathing until you breathe smoothly and quietly from your tummy.

When to use

Use the breathing recovery positions and recovery breathing method together when you feel extremely breathless after activity. This is a good method to use with the hand held fan.

Breathing recovery positions



When using these positions try to keep your back straight but let your head drop so your neck is relaxed.

Recovery breathing method

- Stop.
- Take up a breathing recovery position.
- Turn on the hand held fan and aim at your nose and mouth.
- Blow out onto the fan, but don't force the air.
- Don't worry about the in breath; it will take care of its self.
- As you breathe out narrow your mouth slightly, if it helps.
- When you feel ready, blow out for longer.
- Once your breathing has eased, come up straight.
- Relax your shoulders and upper chest.
- Bring your breathing back to your tummy.
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving.

Pursed lips breathing

When using the above techniques of breathing control and recovery breathing some people find narrowing their mouth slightly makes their breathing feel easier. Breathing out through a narrowed mouth like this is called pursed lips breathing. It helps by creating a backpressure that supports your airways. When practicing pursed lips breathing gradually narrow your mouth until you feel your breathing becomes a little easier. Pursed lips breathing does not help everybody. Ask your physiotherapist or healthcare practitioner for advice.

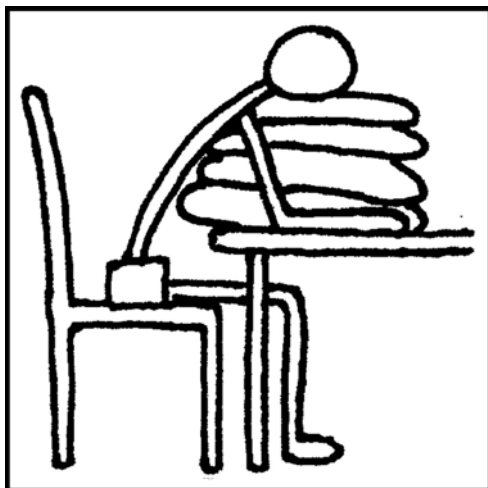
General advice

- Avoid breath holding during activities such as when bending.
- 'Blow as you go', breathe out on effort for example, blow out when reaching or bending.
- Avoid rushing. People who are breathless often rush as they **wrongly** believe if they move quicker they will be less breathless when they get there.

- Paced breathing - take a breath **in and out** on each step when climbing the stairs.

Resting positions

The following positions may help if you are breathless at rest or if you are feeling very tired or exhausted from breathlessness.



Relax down onto the pillows as much as possible. Having your legs apart may also help.



Make sure you are fully over on your side. Resting your upper arm on a pillow may also help.

Further information

For further help or advice contact the Breathlessness Intervention Service on 01223 349325, 09:00 to 17:00 Monday to Friday or see our website which can be found on www.cuh.org.uk and search for 'BIS'.



We are currently working towards a smoke free site. Smoking is only permitted in the designated smoking areas.

For advice and support in quitting, contact your GP or the free NHS stop smoking helpline on 0800 169 0 169

Help with this leaflet:



If you would like this information in another language, large print or audio format, please ask the department to contact Patient Information: 01223 216032 or patient.information@addenbrookes.nhs.uk



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