

Palliative Care Team

Breathlessness Intervention Service

Fact sheet six: Shortness of breath and your diet

We all know how important it is to eat a varied and nourishing diet. When we are unwell this is particularly important, yet people who experience difficulties with their breathing often find it difficult to eat enough. This leaflet answers some of the questions people with breathing difficulties often ask about their diet and suggests ways to help.

Some commonly asked questions include:

My appetite is poor – what can I do?

- Small, frequent meals may be more manageable than three meals a day – eat or drink something every two to three hours.
- If you cannot manage a main meal, a nourishing soup or pudding would be a good substitute.
- Try to maximise the nutritional content of all foods/drinks by adding high calorie ingredients such as cream, full cream milk, butter, yoghurt, evaporated milk etc. wherever possible.
- If you feel full up quickly **avoid drinking at meal times.**
- Build-up, Complan or Vitafood can be a useful meal replacement and can be purchased from most chemists and large supermarkets.
- Nutritional supplements (for example, Ensure Plus, Fortisip, or Enlive) are sometimes prescribed by GPs or dieticians for individuals who find it particularly difficult to eat sufficient amounts – please ask to see your dietician.
- Use a small plate for meals, large meals can often put you off your food completely. You can always have second helpings.
- Take advantage of times when you do have an appetite. Keep nutritious snacks handy, eat when you feel able and treat yourself with any foods you particularly enjoy.
- A glass of wine, sherry or brandy before meals may help to stimulate your appetite. However, do check with your doctor first.
- Try not to drink too much tea, coffee, squash or water as these are low in energy and can fill you up. Instead, try full cream milk, milky coffee, yoghurt drinks, or supplement drinks such as Build-up, Complan or Vitafood.

What about when I'm feeling sick?

- Eating small, frequent meals may also help if nausea is a problem.
- Try to eat or drink something every two to three hours.
- Cold food and drinks are often more acceptable and allow you to avoid cooking smells.
- Eating in a well-ventilated room may also prove helpful.
- Dry foods such as toast, plain or ginger biscuits and chilled drinks can also help.

How can I eat when I have to wear an oxygen mask?

- Nourishing drinks and soups can be drunk through a flexible straw placed under your mask.
- You may wish to ask your doctor about the possibility of using a nasal tube for your oxygen.
- It may be possible to remove your mask for short periods to allow you to eat. You may wish to discuss with your doctor.

I find it tiring preparing and eating food.

- Frozen, chilled or packet convenience meals can be useful and can be as nutritious as freshly prepared meals.
- Make several portions of meals and freeze them for use on days when you feel less like cooking – but make sure you reheat food thoroughly.
- You may be entitled to have meals delivered to your house – check with your doctor, dietician or social worker.
- Try to choose soft foods, such as well cooked egg dishes, soups, puddings, crustless bread with butter or margarine and a tasty topping (for example meat/fish paste, mashed banana, cream cheese, smooth peanut butter), or you may like to experiment with mashing, mincing or liquidising foods.
- Nourishing drinks can also be useful.

My mouth or throat is sore or dry

This is a problem for individuals with breathing difficulties, but may also be due to one or more of your medications.

If your mouth or throat is dry...

- Try to sip small amounts of fluid often.
- Make your meals moist by adding gravies, sauces, cream, evaporated milk, or fruit juices.
- Sucking ice cubes, fruit drops or even tinned pineapple chunks can help moisten your mouth.
- If mouth dryness is a severe problem, your GP may saliva spray or lozenges.

If your mouth or throat is sore...

- Avoid rough, crisp, spicy or salty foods and try using a little sugar to tone down acid foods and drinks.
- Warm foods may be easier to eat than hot or cold ones.
- Try eating soft foods, or try mincing, mashing or liquidising your meals.

My ability to taste food appears to have changed

- Try eating foods with stronger smells and flavours. Experiment with seasonings, herbs and spices.
- Avoid hot foods – food often tastes better at room temperature.
- Fish, chicken, eggs or bean and lentil dishes may be more palatable than meat.
- For some a 'metallic' taste in the mouth can be a problem so avoid any foods that make this worse.

Will any foods make my coughing worse?

Some people believe that certain foods may stimulate coughing. However, this varies from person to person and no proven links have been found with any particular foods. If you find that certain foods/drinks cause you to cough more than others, you may wish to avoid them but you should discuss this with your dietician to ensure that you continue to have a nutritionally adequate diet.

Are there any special diets that will help me?

Unfortunately, there are no special diets that have been proven to help reduce breathlessness. Please check with your doctor or dietician before commencing any special diets/dietary supplements.

What about Vitamin and Mineral supplements?

If you are eating a varied and adequate diet there is no need for extra vitamin or mineral supplements. There is no evidence that taking large doses of certain vitamins or minerals will help control your symptoms, in fact this can be dangerous. If your diet is inadequate and you wish to use vitamins and minerals, make sure you take no more than advised on the packaging.

Is there anything I can do to help constipation?

Constipation can be caused by many different medications, reduced mobility, changes in diet and inadequate fluid intake.

- Make sure you are drinking plenty. Aim for at least eight cups of fluid each day.
- Eat a selection of higher fibre foods each day. For example try to choose whole-wheat cereal, wholegrain bread and pasta, brown rice and beans, peas or lentils.

- Eat a variety of fruit and vegetables each day.
- If your appetite is poor, try not to fill yourself up with too many high fibre foods in preference to more nutritious high calorie foods.
- If your constipation persists you should consult your doctor.

I hope this leaflet has answered any concerns you may have about your diet. If you have any further questions, please speak to your doctor or dietician.

Remember that it is common to have 'good' and 'bad' days so don't get too worried if you don't manage to eat as much as on others – eat to enjoy your food.



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

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Document history

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Contact number	01223 586703
Publish/Review date	January 2011/January 2014
File name	Shortness_of_breath_and_your_diet
Version number/Ref	2/PIN2543