

Frequently asked questions

This factsheet is for guidance only and has been produced with assistance from healthcare professionals

Breathlessness is the feeling of being out of breath. During advanced illnesses, breathlessness can occur at a much lower level of physical exertion than normally expected; even crossing a room slowly can be a struggle. Living with long term breathlessness can be an emotional and physical challenge.

Is being breathless harming me?

Breathlessness, although unpleasant and distressing, is not in itself harmful. It is important for you to remain as active as your illness allows you to be.

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, as on previous occasions, you will recover your breathing. There are techniques which you can learn to help you reduce and regain control of both your breathlessness and the associated anxiety.

What else can I do to help my breathlessness?

Cool air

Cooling your face 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 gently spray your face with water or 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 feel frustrating, but it will allow you to conserve your energy for the things that are more 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 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!

Remember, it is important to be as active as you can.

Are there any drugs that will help my breathlessness?

- Morphine; we usually think of morphine as a drug to treat pain, but in smaller doses it can be very helpful for breathlessness.
- Breathlessness can exacerbate anxiety. Sedative drugs may help to relieve acute episodes of anxiety and panic. Lorazepam tablets placed under the tongue can be helpful.
- Low dose antidepressants (mirtazapine and sertraline) can help to reduce anxiety and may modify the brain's response to long term breathlessness.
- Steroids (prednisolone or dexamethasone) can help reduce inflammation in the airways of the lungs and hence reduce breathlessness.
- Nebulised saline; a nebuliser is a small machine that turns liquid medication into a fine mist, so that you can breathe it deep into your lungs. Sterile salt water (saline) can be used via a nebuliser to loosen sticky phlegm.

Will oxygen help me?

Oxygen may help breathlessness in some people, but it does not help everyone and in some patients can even be harmful. Using a fan or sitting by an open window with cool air blowing on to your face may give the same benefit. Your doctor will let you know if oxygen therapy may help you. If you only need oxygen for short periods of time, an oxygen cylinder may be recommended. This is a storage tank containing oxygen for you to breathe. If you need oxygen for longer periods of time, you may have an oxygen concentrator. This is a larger machine that takes and filters oxygen from the surrounding air to supply to you.

What other treatments might help me?

Complimentary therapies that help you to relax may be useful for managing your breathlessness. Therapies such as acupuncture, aromatherapy and massage may be helpful.

This leaflet is based on written information developed by the Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service.

016 231 3771

In cases of comments or complaints, please contact:

Chief Executive or Director of Care Services
LOROS, Groby Road, Leicester. LE3 9QE

or, Care Quality Commission, East Midlands Office, Citygate, Gallowgate, Newcastle Upon Tyne. NE1 4PA

Alternative language copies available:

If you would like this information in another language or format, please contact the Patient Experience

LOROS Groby Road, Leicester LE3 9QE

☎ (0116) 231 3771

✉ info@loros.co.uk

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Registered Charity No: 506120

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