

Top tips to help with breathlessness

What is this leaflet for?

We all get breathless from time to time, especially when active or exercising. But for people with lung conditions, feeling breathless is more common.

Feeling breathless can be scary. But feeling scared releases adrenaline and can make you more breathless. That can mean faster, smaller breaths, and more fear. If left unchecked, this can become a vicious cycle. It can even cause a panic attack.

This leaflet has tips to help with your breathlessness and stop the vicious cycle.

This includes:

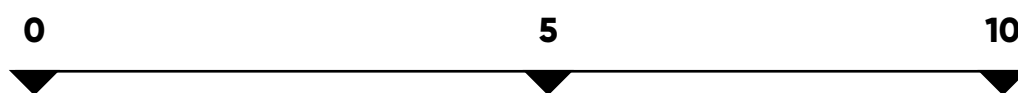
- Staying active
- Breathing techniques
- Mindset

Staying active

Pace yourself

Some people rush tasks, like dressing or walking. This may get things over with sooner but can make you more breathless. Pacing can help you stay active and manage your breathlessness. It is especially useful if you tend to overdo things.

Imagine your breathing on a scale from 0 to 10 and try not to go above 5. If you go over, you are not pacing yourself properly and your breathing may get out of control. Staying below will make sure you are comfortable and not too breathless.



0
Breathing is comfortable. You do not feel breathless at all. You might be sitting or resting.

5
You get breathless but you can control it.

10
Breathing is very uncomfortable. You feel breathless. You might be rushing or exerting yourself too much.

Stop, rest and relax

If you are breathless, stop what you are doing. Focus on relaxing your shoulders, neck, and chest. Otherwise, these muscles will become tired. When you have control of your breathing, carry on again.



Distract yourself

Thinking about something else can really help. It takes your mind away from your breathing.

Counting is a good way to do this. This might be going back from 100 in 7's, how many green objects you can see, or names beginning with the letter 'A'.

If you focus on something other than your breathing, it settles down much quicker.



Keeping as physically active as you can

Staying active is important for us physically and mentally. When you exercise, do it at a level that feels moderate for you. That means not too hard, but not too easy either. Do not worry too much if you are a bit out of breath, it is normal.

Try keeping a diary (or list) of the exercise you have done and for how long. Imagine effort on a scale of 0 to 5 and aim for 3. You can also use a smart watch or pedometer to count your steps. As you get fitter, you may be able to do more. Build your fitness up gradually.

There is a special course for people with breathing problems called pulmonary rehabilitation. It can help you stay physically active. If you have not completed this course, ask your doctor or nurse. The British Lung Foundation also has more information on their website.

Keep active programme from Asthma and Lung UK:

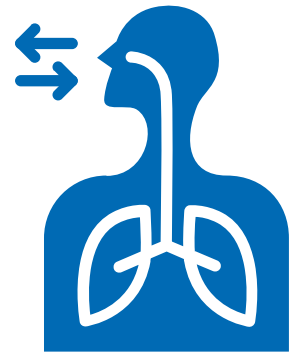
www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/living-with/keeping-active/keep-active-programme

Breathing techniques

Take control of your breathing

Paying attention as you breathe out can help control your breathing. This might take some practice when you feel breathless, but it works. Focus on slow, gentle, and deep breaths out.

Think of a bathtub. You cannot add water if it is already full. After each bath you empty the tub, ready for the next. To get a good breath in, you must empty your lungs first.



Learn belly breathing

Belly breathing can help you relax. It is also called diaphragmatic breathing. It helps you use your diaphragm, an important muscle for breathing.

1. Sit or lie in a comfortable place.
2. Relax your shoulders (lower them away from your ears).
3. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach.
4. Gently breathe in through your nose as much as you can.
5. Feel the air moving through your nose, and down to your middle. Your stomach and the sides of your waist should expand but your chest may stay still.
6. Breathe out very slowly and steadily through your mouth. Hold this breath out as long as you can and feel your stomach gently shrinking back. Repeat these steps a few times. [Click here to watch this breathing control video.](#)

Find a position that helps your breathing

Certain positions can help you breathe more easily.

Try leaning forward whilst sitting down. Rest your arms on something, like a table or even a shopping trolley.



www.cuh.nhs.uk/patient-information/leaflet-4-positions-to-ease-breathlessness

Use a handheld cool air fan

Handheld cool air fans can help your breathing. Hold the fan about 6 inches away from your face. Make sure you point the fan at your nose and mouth. This will stimulate the nerves in your face, which helps you feel less breathless.

Mindset

Focus on managing breathlessness, not avoiding it

Sometimes, people avoid tasks to avoid being breathless. But this only stops breathlessness in the short term. In the long term, it is a bad idea. It may lead to you becoming unfit and even feeling depressed. It is much better to learn how to deal with breathlessness for your future.

Medicines, like inhalers, will help but will not stop breathlessness completely. The trick is to control your breathing. Practising the techniques in this leaflet will be helpful.

Learn to relax

Being tense is hard on your body and mind. Relaxation helps your breathing, heart, and muscles. Learning to relax can take practice, but it is worth it. It can help with breathing, tension, and everyday stress.

Remember, panic attacks cannot kill you

We know it is easy to panic when breathless. 6 out of 10 people with breathing problems feel the same way too. But this can lead to a panic attack.

Some people might feel like they cannot breathe, others even worry about dying. But remember, no one has ever died of a panic attack. Use distraction, breathing control, and try to relax. Your breathing should settle down if you are having a panic attack.

Expect good days and bad days

When you have COPD, you will have good days and bad days. On a good day, it is tempting to do too much. But you can suffer because of this and feel tired out the next day. We call this boom and bust.

Getting the balance is important. Not overdoing it on a good day, means you will have more energy on a bad day. To find your balance, plan what you need to do and when to do it.

Speak to your doctor or nurse if you are worried

These tips can help you manage your breathing. If you have tried them and they have not helped, you may have a chest infection.

In this case, please seek further advice from a healthcare professional. This could be a nurse, doctor, physiotherapist, or occupational therapist.

