

Breathlessness (being short of breath)



This information sheet offers suggestions that may help if you are having difficulty breathing.

Ways of managing breathlessness include:

- breathing techniques
- medication
- relaxation exercises.

Managing breathlessness will depend on the cause of your shortness of breath. There are several ways to ease your discomfort. Your doctor may do some tests to investigate your breathlessness, including a chest X-ray or measuring how much oxygen is making it into your bloodstream. It is important to work out what is causing your breathlessness and to help you manage this.

A breathing exercise to try

This is a simple breathing exercise that is short, easy to remember and you can do it anywhere. The exercise targets breathing and the tension we hold in our shoulders. People sometimes find it easier to close their eyes during this exercise but it's totally up to you.

In this exercise you are going to focus on slow, controlled but natural breathing.

First focus your attention on your breathing. Feel the air coming into your body and then leaving again.

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| Breathe in slowly for a count of 3 | 1 - 2 - 3 |
| Hold the breathe for a count of 3 | 1 - 2 - 3 |
| Breathe out slowly for a count of 3 | 1 - 2 - 3 |

Breathe out slowly and normally – do not force or blow your breath out.

Combine this with your shoulders. For the first three counts raise your shoulders, then hold for a count of three, then, as you breathe out for three counts also relax your shoulders. You might like to imagine warm water running down your back – gently soothing and softening the tension in your

shoulders as you relax.

Repeat three to five times or until you feel relaxed.

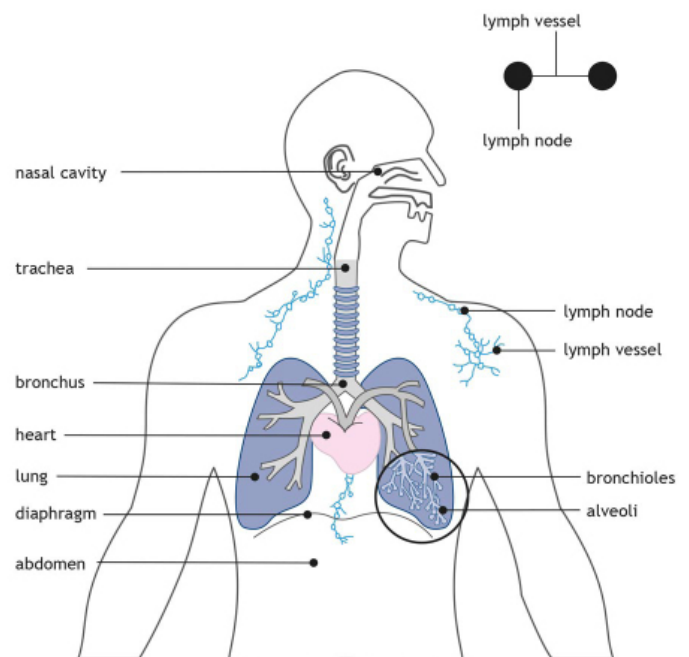
Breathing techniques

Although breathlessness can be a difficult symptom to live with, there are things you can do to prevent or reduce its impact on your life. Here we explain some breathing techniques that can help.

Get into a comfortable position.

When you feel breathless, it helps being in a comfortable position that supports your upper chest muscles and allows your diaphragm and tummy to expand.

The diaphragm is a dome-like sheet of muscle that divides the chest cavity from the abdomen.



A picture showing a diaphragm



Here we describe four comfortable positions to use when you feel breathless

Position 1

Sit in a chair in an upright position, with your back supported, legs uncrossed and feet resting comfortably on the floor. Let your shoulders drop and feel heavy, with your arms resting softly in your lap. Keep your head upright.



Position 2

Sit in a chair and lean forward with your upper body. Have your legs uncrossed, feet on the floor and shoulders relaxed. Slowly move forward a little so that your elbows and lower arms are resting on your thighs, supporting your upper body. Keep your knees shoulderwidth apart and let your chest relax when you lean forward.



Position 3

Stand and lean forward onto a secure surface (i.e. the kitchen bench). Let your arms and elbows rest on the surface so that you're supporting the weight of your upper body. Keep your shoulders and chest relaxed by letting your

forearms remain shoulder-width apart.



Position 4

Stand in an upright position and lean back against a secure surface. Let your arms drop to your sides and make your shoulders heavy and relaxed.



Action plan for breathlessness

When you are aware of your breathlessness:

1. Tell yourself to stop and respond by pausing, breathe out slowly through your mouth.
2. Use positive, reassuring self-talk. (For example, **“This will pass, slow down ... calm down ... I can slow my breathing.”**)
3. Sigh slowly and gently ... letting out a soft sound while you flop and drop your shoulders.
4. Focus on your slow and gentle out breath making your out breath twice as long as your in breath. Don't think about breathing in ... it will happen naturally.

- Put yourself in a position that supports your head and shoulders to relax comfortably (elbows resting on knees or sit/recline well-supported).

Remind yourself “Slow down ... calm, relax ... it will be okay” because you can slow your breathing and get enough air. Allow yourself to feel comfortable and at ease.

- Breathe out slowly as if you were going to blow gently through a straw. This helps you breathe out the old air from your lungs making room for fresh air.
- Continue to breathe slowly and gently.
- Your breathing is slowing ... allow your mind to focus on a feeling or place that helps you feel comfortable and relaxed. Take yourself there while you continue to breathe out slowly in a position that is comfortable for you. Let your body become heavy and loose.

When your breathing has settled:

Think about breathing in “ smelling the flowers” through your nose.

- Breathe out slowly and softly through your nose or breathe out slowly and softly through your mouth—enough to lightly flicker a candle flame.
- Feel your breathing deep and low in your body.

Medication

Your doctor may give you medication (drugs) to help with breathlessness. These may treat pneumonia (chest infection), wheezing, fluid build-up in the lungs or anxiety.

Relaxation

Some people with breathlessness may find at times that it causes them to feel anxious. Finding it hard to breath can make you feel panicky.

Anxiety may cause you to breathe too fast and to take shallow breaths from the top of your lungs rather than from your lower chest. This may make you feel more breathless, which in turn can increase the anxiety.

Learning and practising relaxation can help you control anxiety and breathe more easily when needed.

The Cancer Society has two CDs that may help you relax. You can download your free copy from our website (www.cancernz.org.nz), or pick up a CD from your local Cancer Society.