

# Breathlessness

## What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness (also known as dyspnoea) is when you feel short of breath or have difficulty breathing. Breathlessness can be a very distressing event and have a significant impact on a person's quality of life.

## What causes breathlessness?

Breathlessness may be caused by a number of reasons. These often include advanced heart or lung disease, chest infections, poor fitness, increased exertion, excessive weight, stress and anxiety. Breathlessness is more noticeable at times when your body requires more energy such as when you are walking or showering, when you have an infection or when you feel upset or isolated.

The body's automatic response to becoming breathless can include:

- Breathing more quickly
- Breathing with your shoulders and upper chest
- Feeling frightened or panicked.

Whilst this response is natural it can also make the feelings of breathlessness and anxiety worse.

## What can you do?

There are a number of strategies that may help you cope with breathlessness. These techniques should be practiced when you are not feeling breathless so you feel confident in performing them if you do become breathless.

## Breathing control

Short quick breaths mean you are using more energy to breathe and not getting enough oxygen into your lungs. You need to slow it down...

- Calm yourself and focus on taking long, slow, deep breaths
- In through your nose, out through your mouth
- Breathe in for three counts and breathe out for three counts
- Concentrate on taking breaths into the lower chest (diaphragm) rather than upper chest and shoulders (accessory muscles)
- Keep doing this until you are breathing normally.

## Pursed lip breathing

You can add this to the above technique.

Breathe in slowly through your nose (or nose and mouth). When breathing out, purse your lips and breathe out slowly. Concentrate on making your 'out breath' twice as long as your 'in breath'.

This helps keep your airways open for longer and helps to empty all the old air from the lungs before taking in the new air.

Repeat for a minute or two, or as long as you feel comfortable.

## Positioning

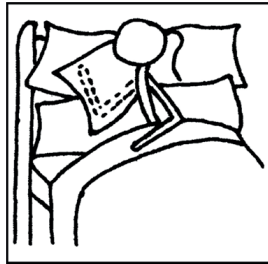
When you are feeling breathless, there are certain positions that are more comfortable while you are trying to catch your breath.

These positions put less strain on the abdominal muscles (diaphragm) during breathing.

Some examples of these are:

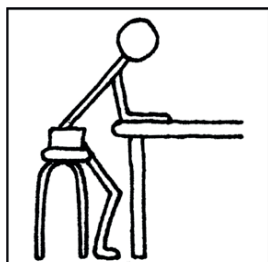
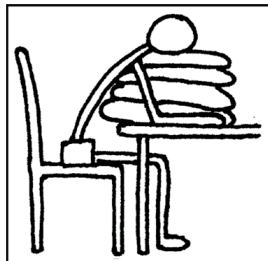
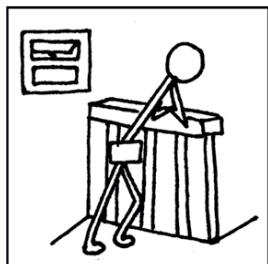
### High side lying

- Lying on your side, prop your chest and shoulders up with pillows
- Top knee is bent up
- Lower arm under pillow



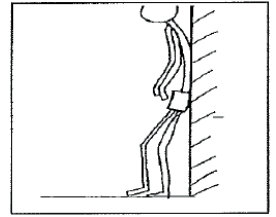
### Forward lean in standing or sitting

- If there is a piece of furniture handy, (table, windowsill, rail) lean forward and rest your hands or elbows on top of it.
- Relax your neck and your shoulders.
- If seated at a table you can rest your head on some pillows
- Feet flat on the floor
- Lean your chest forward slightly and rest your elbows on your knees
- Relax your neck and shoulder muscles
- Rest your chin on your hands or rest your head on some pillows.



## Relaxed standing

- Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart
- Lean your hips back against a wall for support
- Lean your torso forward and rest your hands on your thighs.



You can practice the breathing techniques above while using these positions to catch your breath.

## Increase airflow

- Open windows and doors in your house
- Turn ceiling fans on
- Sit in front of a hand-held or pedestal fan, aim the draught towards your nose and lips.

Other things that may help:

- Distraction ie. Reading, listening to music, watching television
- Allowing time to rest during and after activities that make you breathless
- Relaxation techniques for the mind and body for example meditation and visualisation
- Wearing loose and comfortable clothing
- Let others help with physically demanding tasks if needed
- Having rest spots around the house that you can use when you need to.

## Abnormal Breathlessness

Breathlessness may increase gradually over time. However, if you have a sudden increase in breathlessness or it is accompanied by a temperature or cough producing phlegm you may have a chest infection. If this occurs it is important to see your doctor.

If you have any concerns or questions regarding the above information please do not hesitate to contact your Physiotherapist on 4433 2370.

Physiotherapist: \_\_\_\_\_



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