

# Eating well with breathing difficulties and fatigue

This leaflet offers more information about eating well with breathing difficulties and fatigue (feeling tired or weak). If you have any further questions or concerns, please speak to the staff member in charge of your care.

## What are breathing difficulties and fatigue and why have I got them?

It's normal to get out of breath when you've overexerted yourself, but when breathlessness comes on suddenly and unexpectedly, it may be a warning sign of a medical condition.

There are many causes of breathing problems, many of which are long-term or chronic.

Millions of people have breathing problems because of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), which includes emphysema and chronic bronchitis.

Breathing problems may also stem from other serious problems such as lung cancer, tuberculosis, and pneumonia.

Other causes of long-term breathlessness are:

- Obesity or being unfit
- Poorly controlled asthma
- Anaemia, where there is a low level of oxygen in the blood caused by a lack of red blood cells or haemoglobin (the part of red blood cells that carries oxygen)
- Heart failure, when your heart has trouble pumping enough blood around your body, usually because the heart muscle has become too weak or stiff to work properly.

Sudden shortness of breath (SOB), or breathing difficulty (dyspnoea), is the most common reason for visiting an emergency department (A&E), and one of the most common reasons people call 999 for an ambulance.

## Why is eating well with breathing difficulties and fatigue important?

If you have breathing difficulties and fatigue it may be harder to eat well and having a dry mouth may make this worse. Good nutrition is important so you don't lose weight. If you have breathing difficulties it takes more energy to breathe so the body needs more calories.

There are many types of food you can eat to help with your breathing.

If you need to gain weight to stay healthy, you may need to eat a high calorie diet.

A dietitian can help with a food plan and give tips on cooking, baking, eating away from home, reading food labels and nutritional supplements to increase your calories.

The body needs enough **calories, protein, vitamins, and minerals** to maintain a healthy immune system. Poor appetite or low calories can lower your immune system.

A dietitian can let you know the right number of **calories** for you.

**Protein** helps to build cells in the body. Food high in **carbohydrates** gives you energy.

**Fat** is also a primary source of energy.

## **Your dietitian can discuss a balanced diet suited to your needs.**

Your doctor or dietitian should let you know the right amount of **fluid** you should drink each day. Most people need to drink six – eight cups of water a day.

## **How can I make sure I eat well?**

### **General tips:**

- Eating three small meals and three snacks each day may help reduce any feeling of fullness that stops you eating enough. If you are planning to eat a large meal, eat it earlier in the day.
- Do not lay down after eating a meal.
- Rest before eating.
- Have water and juice or high energy drinks available to drink at all times.
- Avoid foods that may make you feel bloated or over-full.
- Cook foods that are easy to prepare.
- If you start to get short of breath while eating, slow down and take smaller mouthfuls.

If you are bloated or have feelings of fullness, any additional pressure from breathing can make you feel even fuller. You may feel bloated when you eat in a hurry, as this causes air to be inhaled. Some foods can also cause bloating or gas, such as whole grain breads, broccoli, cabbage, cauliflower, beans, milk, onions, and nuts.

### **Tips for adding calories if you have lost weight:**

Try adding these foods to your diet, as they are high in calories and help with weight gain:

- Butter or margarine
- Mayonnaise
- Peanut butter
- Cream cheese
- Sour cream or yoghurt
- Whipped cream
- Honey or jam
- Powdered coffee creamers
- Raisins, dried fruit or nuts
- Cream
- Milk powder.

### **Tips for adding protein:**

Protein is needed to help fight infection and to build muscle strength.

Meat, beans, pulses, eggs, fish and milk-rich foods contain the most protein.

You can increase your protein by:

- Adding powdered skim milk to meals
- Adding meat or chicken to soups or stews
- Adding grated cheese to meals
- Using a nut butter or nutella in snacks
- Including eggs in snacks, savoury dishes and desserts.

## Tips for helping with loss of appetite:

Loss of appetite is common if you find it hard to breathe or suffer from shortness of breath or lung disease. Any weight loss you have may make you tired, and being tired may make you not want to eat. You can help improve your appetite by:

- Eating small calorie-rich snacks every day
- Eating more at the time of day when you are usually hungrier
- Eating your favourite foods
- Eating convenience foods e.g. ready meals, microwave or frozen meals
- Sucking a mint to stimulate your appetite before eating.

## Useful sources of information

For more information visit the NHS choices website:

[www.nhs.uk/Conditions/shortness-of-breath/Pages/Introduction](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/shortness-of-breath/Pages/Introduction)

## Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about eating well with breathing difficulties and fatigue, please contact the oncology dietetic team on 020 8725 3049 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm), or email [Michelle.Phillpot@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:Michelle.Phillpot@stgeorges.nhs.uk) or [Tanya.pendleton@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:Tanya.pendleton@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

**For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit [www.stgeorges.nhs.uk](http://www.stgeorges.nhs.uk)**

## Additional services

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9am and 5pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing (near the lift foyer).

**Tel:** 020 8725 2453 **Email:** [pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk)

### NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

**Web:** [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)

### NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

**Tel:** 111