

Managing Cancer Related Breathlessness

This leaflet explains some self-management techniques that can help you feel less breathless. If you have any further questions, please speak to a staff member caring for you.

Step 1: Positions to ease breathlessness

The following positions support the muscles in the body that help us with breathing. If you can, try to relax your upper body, including your arms, shoulders and neck, as well as the muscles of your face including your jaw.



Standing and leaning forward

Resting your elbows on the wall, banister, window sill or chair back in front of you.



Sitting and leaning forward

With your elbows resting on your knees or on a table in front of you (use pillows for comfort if you wish).

Allow your hands to relax as much as possible.



Leaning backwards

Stand about 30cm away from a wall, have your feet slightly apart and lean backwards against the wall.

Relax your hands onto your lap or let them hang loosely at your sides. You might find it more comfortable to rest your hands in your pockets.



Lying on your side

With pillows underneath your shoulders and head. Make sure your head and neck feel supported. It may feel more comfortable to have a pillow between your legs.

Step 2: Breathing techniques

Abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing

The aim is to move from faster breathing in your chest to relaxed, slow breathing down into your tummy using a muscle called the diaphragm. We would encourage you to use this style of breathing whenever you can, to help you regulate your breathing. Take slower breaths, in through your nose down into your tummy, then gently breathe out through pursed lips (as if you were going to blow out a candle) to create more room for the next breath in. Do not force your lungs to empty.

You may find it helpful to rest your hand on your tummy as you do this, feel it rise and fall gently with each breath.

Rectangle breathing

This can be useful when you feel very out of breath. Follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you breathe in (nose) and out (pursed lips), seeing if you can start to reduce the speed you move around the rectangle to help to also slow the speed of your breathing.



Pursed lip breathing

Use this technique during the difficult part of an activity, such as bending or lifting, or climbing stairs.

1. Relax your neck and shoulder muscles
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose, don't take a deep breath, a normal breath is fine
3. 'Pucker' or 'purse' your lips, as if you were going to whistle
4. Breathe out slowly through pursed lips.



Step 3: Using a hand-held fan

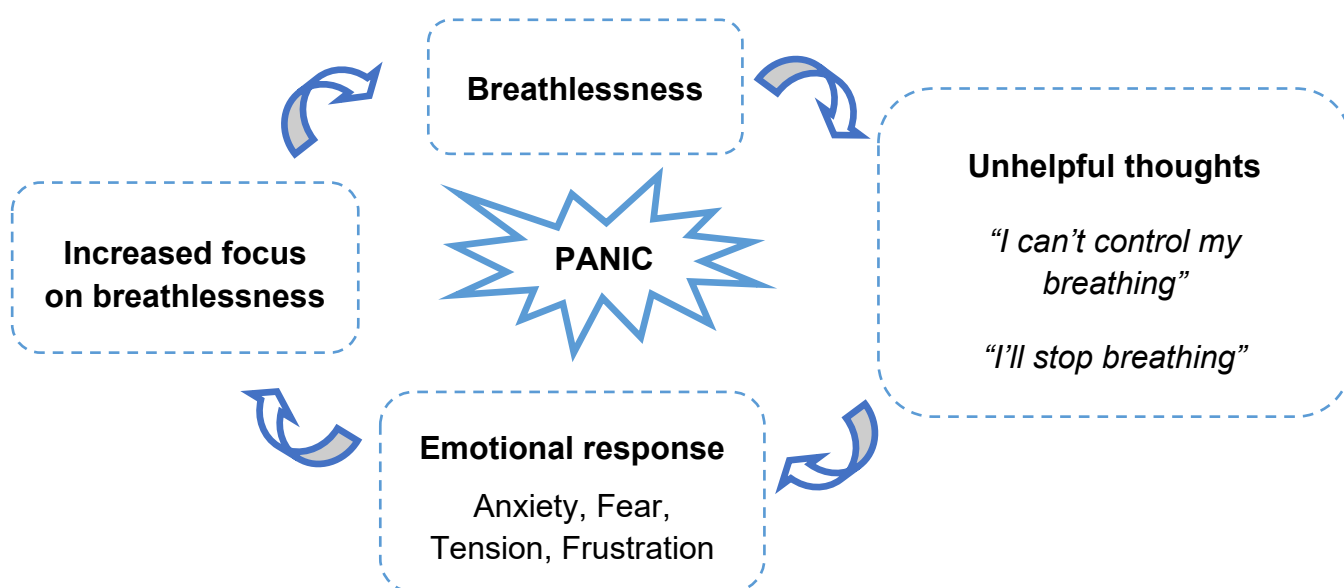


The flow of cool air on your face can help to reduce the sensation of breathlessness. Hold the fan approximately 15-20 cm from your face, directing the flow of air towards the middle of your face around your nose and top lip.

You can also use a standing fan or open a window.

Step 4: Panic and breathlessness

Breathlessness can often cause a normal and understandable emotional response, such as anxiety. However, this can trigger unhelpful thoughts, physical symptoms of anxiety and further shortness of breath – this becomes a vicious cycle.

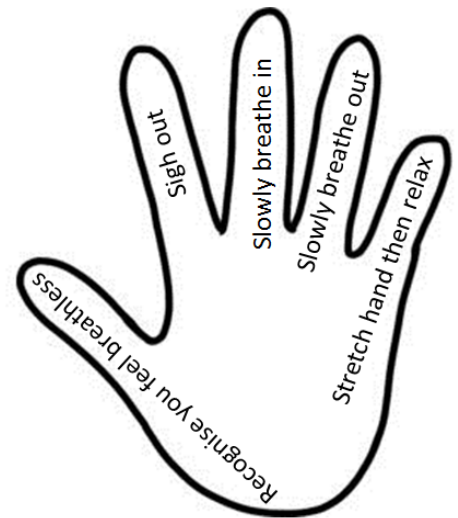


Breaking the panic cycle

1. **Pacing:** Panic can be prevented by pacing activities and using your breathing techniques to prevent the breathlessness escalating to the point where it causes distress. Try to be aware of increasing breathlessness and stop the activity before your breathing feels uncontrolled.

2. The **'panic hand'** is a technique that can help you to focus away from unhelpful thoughts and gain control of anxiety. Grab each digit on your hand as you carry out the action described for each digit. Do this a few times to help you start to relax. As you do, slow the process down and take a few seconds for each step.

1. Recognise that you are feeling breathless
2. Sigh out
3. Breathe in gently
4. Breathe out gently, for a little longer
5. Stretch your fingers and wrists fully, then let them relax.



3. **Grounding:** Try turning your attention away from thoughts, emotions or worries and focus your attention on the present moment. Notice 5 things you can see, hear, touch, smell and taste. Push your feet firmly on the floor, wriggle your toes and notice you are supported by the ground beneath you.
4. **Challenging thinking:** It can be hard to get to grips with your thoughts when feeling anxious, but it can be useful to remind yourself that you have coped with breathlessness before and that you have the tools in this handout to support you. Whilst the experience of breathlessness can be distressing, it can be helpful to know that when you are breathless your body is working effectively, you will continue to breathe, and you will recover.

Step 5: Managing activity and Pacing

It is important to balance rest with activity to preserve your energy. This can help you do more, build confidence and improve your mood.

- Try not to rush any activity, take your time and go at a comfortable pace.
- Remember not to hold your breath whilst you are completing a task. Think **Blow-As-You-Go**. Focus on breathing out, for example with each right step. This can be combined with pursed lip breathing.
- It can help to take frequent breaks during or in between activities to get your breath back.

- Plan ahead, try to spread your activities throughout the day to help you to have time to recover.
- You might find it helpful to use a walking aid to support your breathing.
- Eating and drinking: aim to have smaller meals more frequently during the day, eat with smaller mouthfuls and avoid food that is very difficult to chew. It can be helpful to choose softer food or to add sauces to make the meal moist and easier to eat.

Step 7: Long-term Anxiety Management

Practicing regular **relaxation and/or mindfulness** can help relieve the physical tension you may experience with breathlessness and help you develop ways to calm and relax your mind. Try some of these relaxation exercises and see what works best for you.

- **Visualise:** Imagine a place that you find peaceful and relaxing. This might be somewhere you have been before, perhaps being by the sea or taking a walk in nature or somewhere you have created in your mind that feels like your perfect relaxing place. When in this place take time to see what you can see, hear, feel and smell.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:** Scan your body from head to toe, gently tensing each muscle before release and feeling your muscles relax. Do not hold your breath, continue with relaxed belly breathing throughout.



- **Mindfulness:** There are lots of mindfulness exercises, this one is called 'leaves on the stream'. Imagine sitting by a river watching leaves floating past on the surface of the water. When you notice a thought or feeling come up, try to place it on a leaf and allow it to flow past you down the stream. With each new thought or feeling, place it on a leaf and watch it pass.
- **Full Circle Wellbeing hub:** A free resource with a variety of resources including breathing exercises and relaxation techniques (www.fullcirclefund.org.uk).

Talking to others

Support from others can really help you manage your breathlessness. Share some of these tools with others and explain what they can do to help you. It can also be very helpful to

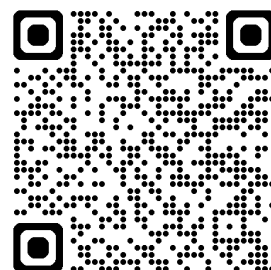
share some of your thoughts and feelings with others so they can understand your experiences and help you feel more connected to those around you. Try talking to friends, family, your hospital team and your GP.

Sex, intimacy and breathlessness

We want to normalise that there can be issues with sex and intimacy. Please remember, intimacy has many forms.

Before having sex, it can help to share any worries about sex and breathlessness with your partner. Consider when you have sex, try to have sex after you have rested and your breathing is more comfortable. Avoid having sex when you have a full stomach as this might put more pressure on your chest. If you feel breathless during sex, pause and try your breathing techniques and try again and try different positions.

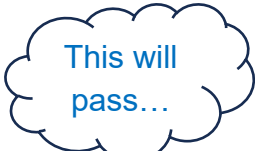
Asthma + Lung UK www.asthmaandlung.org.uk have helpful information including illustrations of different sexual positions that don't use as much energy and might be helpful to try if you are breathless.



[Having sex when you have a lung condition | Asthma + Lung UK](#)

Action Plan

Below is a summary of the key steps to follow when breathless



This will pass...













REST & RELAXATION

- **Think; I have felt like this before, and my breathing has eventually settled**
- **Position; Lean forward and relax your shoulders**
- **Focus; on your breath out**
- **Rectangle breathing**
- **Use your fan**
- **Focus your attention on what you can see, hear or touch around you**
- **Stay still and upright for a few minutes after you have recovered**

Useful sources of information

Cancer Care Map is an online resource that can help you to find cancer support service in your local area. You can use this to find local and online physical activity services.



www.cancercaremap.org



Macmillan resources (www.macmillan.org.uk) [Managing everyday life with breathlessness | Macmillan Cancer Support](#)

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care (www.acprc.org.uk) [Patient information leaflets 1 - ACPRC](#)

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or care. You can contact the PALS team on the advisory telephone line Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 2pm to 5pm.

A Walk-in service is available:

Monday, Tuesday and Thursday between 10am and 4pm

Friday between 10am and 2pm.

Please contact PALS in advance to check if there are any changes to opening times.

The Walk-in and Advisory telephone services are closed on Wednesdays.

PALS is based within the hospital in the ground floor main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough Wing.

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS UK

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

Web: 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

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk).

The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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