

Coping with Breathlessness

A guide for those
who are experiencing
shortness of breath



Weston
Hospicecare

Reg. Charity No. 900328

Image courtesy of Gap Year Travel Store

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For more information on the techniques described in this leaflet, please talk to your Hospice Community Nurse Specialist or to our hospice physiotherapist.

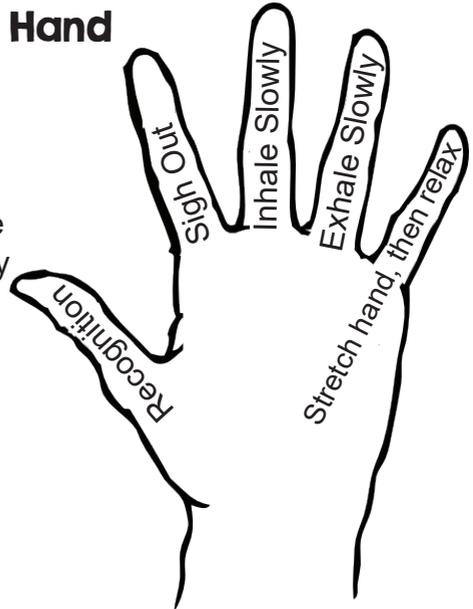
The 10-Point Plan

1. Find yourself a position of comfort.
2. Have cool air on your face; open a window or carry a mini fan in your pocket.
3. Practice relaxed breathing (see page 6).
4. Take sips of cold water or sharp fruit drinks (e.g., pineapple juice, which helps break down sputum in the mouth).
5. Try to relax. You could listen to music or a relaxation CD, massage your neck and shoulders or practicing other relaxation techniques.
6. Wear loose comfortable clothing and avoid constricting items of clothing.
7. Distract yourself by focusing on a favourite hobby.
8. Use the Calming Hand (see the following page) if you start to feel anxious.
9. Try not to hold your breath, especially when you're walking up stairs or slopes.
10. Let your muscles breathe with you, rather than against you. If possible try to relax and lower your shoulders.

How to Use the Calming Hand

When you are short of breath, it can make you feel worried. This in turn can make you more breathless. In this situation, some people find that they become very anxious or panicky.

When this happens, place your hand in your lap or on the arm of your chair, with your palm facing upwards. Then, follow the instructions below.



The Five Steps

The Calming Hand

- 1. Recognition:** Focus on your thumb and use your thumb as the prompt to recognise the signs of anxiety and the need to use the Calming Hand technique.
- 2. Sigh out:** This will help to relax your neck and shoulder muscles, and help to lower your shoulders. You need to be able to have a good breathe out before you can breathe in.
- 3. Inhale slowly:** Breathe in slowly and gently.
- 4. Exhale slowly:** Breathe out slowly and gently.
- 5. Stretch, then relax:** Stretch your hands and fingers out, then relax your hand and let it feel loose and floppy.

Repeat this technique until you feel calmer.

Remember: Breathlessness is not always harmful. Sometimes, just hand stretching is enough to help you stop feeling anxious.

** Image designed by Weston Hospicecare.*

Helpful Positions for Breathlessness

High side lying

Lie on your side rolled slightly forward. Use 3 or 4 pillows to raise your shoulders, and another one to fill the gap between your waist and armpit. The top pillow should be above the shoulder supporting only your head and neck. Bend your knees slightly with the top one forward. If possible, lie on your healthier lung. A rolled pillow behind the back can help stop you from rolling onto your back and coughing.



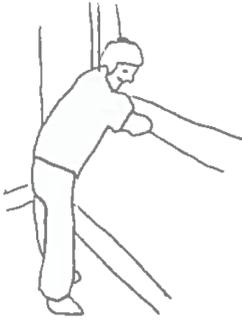
Sitting at a table

Place one (1) or two (2) pillows on a table. Sit leaning forward at the hips to support your upper chest, and place your head on the pillows.

Sitting leaning forwards

Sit leaning forwards with a straight back. Rest your arms on your thighs with your wrists relaxed. You may prefer to keep your elbows straight.

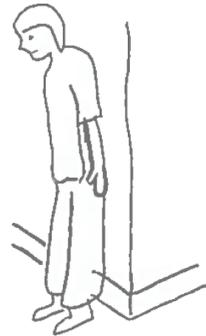




Stand leaning forwards with your arms resting on a ledge (e.g., the kitchen worktop, a window sill or banister, or something similar). It is important that you rest forward **only** on fixtures or furniture that do not move and is high enough for you to do so comfortably.

Standing leaning backwards

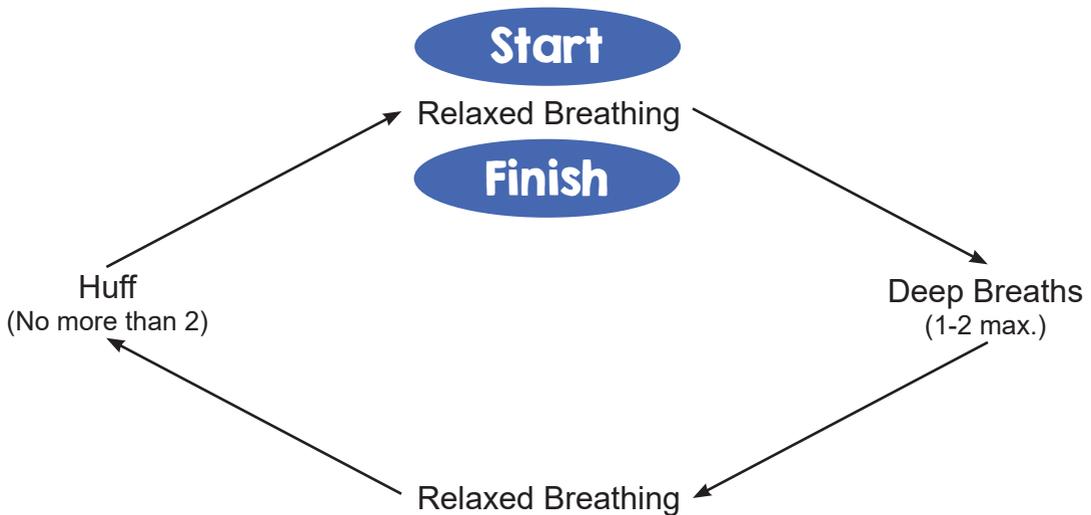
Lean back against a wall, with your shoulders relaxed and with your arms hanging loosely by your sides. You could also try leaning sideways. Your feet should be slightly apart and about 30 cm or 12" from the wall.



** Images hand-drawn by Weston Hospicecare.*

The Active Cycle of Breathing Technique

It is best to be taught the Active Cycle of Breathing Technique (ACBT) by a physiotherapist. The ACBT exercises are relaxed breathing (breathing control), deep breathing and huffing, which are performed in a cycle until your chest more feels clear or until you get too tired. It is very important to do relaxed breathing in between the more active exercises of ACBT, as it allows your airways to relax. You should use this technique if you are having trouble clearing sputum.



Make sure you are in a comfortable position. Place your hand on your tummy just below your ribs. Try breathing in gently through your nose and out through your mouth, making your breath out longer than your breath in.

As you breathe in, your hand should move outwards, giving you the feeling of breathing through your waist. Relax, and lower your shoulders and upper chest.

Deep breaths

By taking deep breaths in, you are making sure that the air gets down to the bottom of your lungs. Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose, and then breathe out through your mouth with pursed lips. Concentrate on inhaling, and the exhaling part will happen naturally.

If your nose is blocked, inhale and exhale through your mouth.

Have a rest between taking your next deep breath. Repeat this 2-3 times, but stop if you feel dizzy or get more breathless.

Relaxed breathing

Before doing a huff, make sure you go back to practicing the relaxed breathing, and continue until your breathing rate is back to your resting level. Remember to breathe through your waist and to relax your lower shoulders and upper chest.

You should also end the cycle with relaxed breathing.

Huff

This takes less energy than coughing and helps to prevent a wheeze. Take a medium breath in then squeeze all the air out rapidly as though you were blowing out a candle. Repeat this no more than twice, and follow it with relaxed breathing.

Note: If you feel pain at any point during the cycle, stop. You can add coughing in to any part of the cycle to help clear secretions.

Other sources of information

If you would like more information on how you can cope with breathlessness, you should first contact your Hospice Community Nurse Specialist or physiotherapist.

If your Hospice Community Nurse Specialist or physiotherapist is unavailable, please use the helplines below:

British Lung Foundation Helpline

03000 030 555

To find your local British Lung Foundation's Breathe Easy Group, call their helpline (03000 030 555) and provide them with your postcode. They can then advise you on your nearest support group.

Macmillan Support Line

0808 808 0000

Macmillan Cancer Information and Support Centre

01934 881 079

*1st Floor, Jackson Barstow Wing, Weston General Hospital,
Grange Road BS23 4TQ*

NHS 111 (previously NHS Direct)

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You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency.