

Management of Breathlessness

Patient information - Respiratory Services

Breathlessness is a major symptom of diseases such as Chronic Cardiac / Respiratory Conditions and Cancer.

Being Breathless

- is frightening and distressing
- can lead to increased levels of fear, anxiety, panic and depression
- can limit your physical activities. Prevent you joining in with family and friends and limit your hobbies



Managing Breathlessness

Support

Talk with family and friends to help them to understand how you are feeling. Let your General Practitioner (GP) know if your breathlessness is becoming troublesome.

Movement of air

Turn on a fan/open a window, the feeling of cool air on your face can help reduce breathlessness.

Positioning

Sit or stand in a leaning forward position. When sitting, have feet apart and flat on the floor. Try resting arms on a table or have them resting on your knees. When standing, support your arms on a table ledge but remember to keep your back straight. When lying, try rolling slightly forward and use 4-5 pillows to help keep your shoulders raised. Placing a pillow under each arm can also help. Please refer to picture on back of pamphlet.

Conserve your energy

Avoid tiredness by pacing yourself. Plan your day and allow time to complete activities. Do tasks you find harder during the time of day that you have the most energy. Ask for help when you need it. Friends and family are only too keen to help when asked.

Distraction and relaxation

To keep calm and reduce anxiety, try using **breathing control**. Focus on such things that will bring you pleasure or calmness, such as listening to the radio, television or music. Meditation may help.

Oxygen therapy

Being breathless does not necessarily mean you are short of oxygen. Oxygen therapy is used for people with low levels of oxygen in the blood stream, which is determined by a blood test. If you are unsure whether you require oxygen, please discuss with your GP.

Medication

Use your reliever inhaler (as directed) if prescribed. If you have difficulty managing your breathlessness there are other medications that may help. It is best to talk to your GP.

Exercise

Regular exercise is important but remember to stop before you get too puffed. Recognise signs such as gasping for breath and increased heart rate, that indicate you need to rest.

Breathing control

Breathe slowly and deeply through your nose (your stomach should expand as you breathe in). Then slowly breathe out through pursed-lips as if you are blowing out candles. Remember to relax your shoulders.

Important Points

- When your breathing feels out of control, it can change the way you feel and live your life
- It is important to find ways which work for you to manage your breathlessness
- Try to keep calm—the more anxious you are, the more breathless you will become
- If breathlessness is impacting significantly on your quality of life contact your GP or hospital doctor as a Breathlessness Management Plan can be tailor made for you. Contact your GP or hospital doctor
- While breathlessness is distressing it is not actually harmful to your body

If your breathlessness is NOT improving despite interventions, it is important to seek medical advice.

References:

Mahler, D. et al. (2010). American College of Chest Physicians consensus statement on the management of dyspnea in patients with advanced lung or heart disease. *CHEST*, 137 (3), 674-691.

For more information about:

- your health and medication, go to www.healthinfo.org.nz
- hospital and specialist services, go to www.cdhb.health.nz

Positions to aid breathlessness

