



**LIVING  
WITH  
BREATHLESSNESS**

**WE ARE  
MACMILLAN.  
CANCER SUPPORT**

**How to pace your  
daily activities**



## Introduction

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As someone living with breathlessness, you may be finding it hard to carry out your usual daily activities, such as dressing, walking up stairs and gardening.

**This is the second of three booklets about breathlessness. It will help you learn how to pace yourself in order to reduce episodes of breathlessness.**

The first booklet helps you learn to control your breathing and the third focuses on the experience of breathlessness and other areas of your illness and how to manage them.

## Living with breathlessness

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### Breathing more easily

If you are finding it hard to breathe, there are some simple exercises that will help you to breathe more easily.

Make yourself comfortable in a chair or prop yourself up in bed with your back well supported.

Place your hands on your abdomen, just below your rib cage. As you breathe in, you will feel your hands rising and being pushed out by your diaphragm and abdominal muscles. As you breathe out, your hands will sink down and in. This will feel as if you are breathing from the waist rather than the upper chest.

Breathe in through your nose and out gently through your mouth, counting three counts for the breath in and four for the breath out.

At the same time, relax your shoulders and upper chest.

Practise this technique several times a day when you are not feeling breathless so that you can use it to good effect when you are. Repeat the exercise between five and 10 times a session.



Breathing more easily – place your hands on your abdomen, just below your rib cage.

### Managing everyday activities

Here are some tips to help you manage your everyday activities:

**Organising your home:** Put items you use most frequently within easy reach. Wall cupboards are easier to access than low cupboards or high shelves so you don't have to bend or stretch to reach the things you need.

**Planning your day:** Plan your day so that you have the time and the breathing capacity to do the activities that are important to you.

Work at a pace that's right for you. Encourage family members to help with daily tasks such as housework. Sit down whenever possible, for example if you want to iron or prepare vegetables.

Plan activities so that you have enough time to do them and you have all you need at hand. Many people with breathlessness say that feeling tired or having no energy is especially difficult to cope with.

It's normal to need rest periods during the day and some days will be more taxing than others. Allow yourself as much rest as you need.

**Thinking ahead:** If there's a specific activity you want to do that you know will tire you, then don't do other routine tasks beforehand in order to save your energy.

Give yourself enough time to deal with unexpected difficulties, such as a flight of stairs or having to stand in a long queue. And don't be afraid to ask for help, perhaps with heavy bags or holding open heavy doors.

### Showering and bathing:

- Bathrooms can make you feel claustrophobic which can increase breathlessness, so try opening a window slightly or leaving the door ajar.
- Don't fill a bath too full or have the water too hot.
- If you shower, keep the spray away from your face and sit safely in the shower if there is enough space.
- When you undress, don't hold your breath as you take clothes over your head. Take your arms out of your top first, then quickly slip it over your head. This means your face is covered for only a short time and you don't have to raise your arms for too long.
- Once you are undressed, sit at the side of the bath and slowly lift one leg in at a time.
- Let the water out before you get out. You may find it easier to kneel up first and rest for a few moments before standing up.
- Have a large towel to hand and wrap this around yourself as you sit on the edge of the bath. This will help to dry you without vigorous rubbing and patting.
- Try to remain seated while you get dry. Bring your feet up so that you don't have to bend to dry them.
- Remember to use gentle lower chest breathing throughout.

## Living with breathlessness

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**Dressing:** Sit down when you are dressing. Choose loose fitting clothes, especially around the waist and chest. Bring your feet up to put on socks, tights and shoes, as bending can make you breathless.

**Lifting heavy items:** You will find that lifting heavy items such as shopping bags or wet laundry may make you tired and short of breath quickly.

Try carrying half the washing load at a time and put the wash basket on a chair next to the clothesline so you don't have to bend far to pick up items.

Carrying shopping in heavy bags by your sides drags your arms down and restricts your breathing. Instead, use a small backpack, a shopping bag on wheels or try half filling shopping bags so they don't become too heavy and awkward.

**Gardening:** Use a low garden stool or chair to help you reach flowerbeds without bending too much and to give you a chance to rest in between activities.

You can sit at a garden table to pot plants. Remember to use lower chest breathing so that you can do more before becoming breathless.

**Bending:** Avoid bending from the waist down as this can restrict your breathing. Instead, try easing yourself into a crouching position, keeping your back straight and bending from the knees.

This keeps your chest upright and your shoulders back. You may find it helpful to hold onto a secure piece of furniture such as a sofa when you do this.



**Bending – ease yourself into a crouching position, keeping your back straight and bending from the knees.**

**Making love:** You and your partner may have concerns about making love at a time when you both need physical and emotional tenderness. These concerns are perfectly normal and if you can both be open about them, they will be easier to resolve.

Treatment such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy can make you feel tired and can reduce your desire to make love. Chemotherapy can also sometimes cause impotence.

If you feel able, talk to your partner about any fears you have about making love, your breathlessness or the cancer itself. This will help to reduce your concerns and anxieties and may help to resolve some of the problems.

Sexual activity includes expressing affection and love by talking, hugging and touching as well as intercourse. Sexual intercourse requires energy and makes demands on your heart and lungs, so have sex when you feel rested and try to avoid times when you are stressed and tired.

This may mean changing the time of day when you have sex. Early evening may be better than late at night. If you have been prescribed bronchodilators (puffers), use them before and after having sex.

Make yourself comfortable in a well-supported position to help you feel more relaxed and less rushed. Take things slowly so you don't get short of breath.

As with any activity, your breathlessness may make it physically difficult to make love, and some positions may make your breathlessness worse than others. Try to keep weight off your chest and avoid bending over.

You may find it easier to be in a sitting or a kneeling position. Avoid positions that may make you feel claustrophobic.

Heterosexual and same sex couples can try the following sexual positions:

- lying side by side, either facing towards each other or one behind the other
- in a sitting position
- the woman kneeling on the floor, with her chest resting on the bed

- the woman sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on the floor, with the man kneeling on the floor in front.

If you prefer to be lying down, make sure your partner keeps their weight off your chest.

The British Lung Foundation website has illustrations of suggested sexual positions for people with breathlessness at: [www.britishlungfoundation.com](http://www.britishlungfoundation.com)

If you become very short of breath during intercourse, take a break and take some long slow breaths, using lower chest breathing.

Remember that not all difficulties will be down to your breathlessness. Changes in your sex life are a part of growing older so slower erections and delayed orgasms are normal in middle and later life.

**Enjoying exercise:** Gentle exercise need not make you breathless, especially if you take it slowly and use lower chest breathing as much as possible.

By gradually increasing the exercise you take, you can help to improve your breathing and feel better. Even people with severe lung problems benefit a lot from small amounts of exercise.

Start slowly by doing arm and leg movements while you are sitting down. Then set yourself goals for walking about, from room to room, going to the front door, the bottom of the garden, down the road and so on. It's surprising how quickly you'll be able to do more.

Remember to take it slowly and to pace your breathing with your steps.

If your breathlessness is not extreme or if you have managed to increase your amount of exercise over time, you may want to try something like swimming or an aqua exercise class.

Try to go when the swimming pool isn't crowded and only do as much as you feel able to. Each time you will be able to do a bit more and this will help you manage your everyday activities more comfortably.

### **Managing slopes and stairs:**

You may be anxious about tackling stairs or walking up slopes. However, if you take each activity slowly and remember

to use lower chest breathing you will be more able to deal with it.

Match your breathing rate with your walking pace to help you control any breathlessness. You can do this by breathing in on one step and out on the next two steps.

Use this technique while climbing stairs. Breathe in on one step and out on the next two.

**Talking on the telephone:** Use an answer machine or ask anyone who is likely to phone you to let it ring until you pick up so that you are not rushing to answer it.

Sit down while you are talking and use short sentences if you are becoming breathless. Pause after each sentence and catch your breath.

### **Making plans**

It is important to plan activities that you can look forward to, such as a holiday or a dance class, as this will make the difficult days easier to cope with.

Break each activity down into manageable stages: if you're travelling to a holiday destination then build in plenty of rest breaks, think about how you are going to transport your luggage and make sure you have all your medication with you at the right times.

Talk to your family, friends, doctors or nurses about any concerns that seem especially difficult. They may be able to think of ways round them or suggest alternatives.

## Further resources

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Macmillan Cancer Support provides a range of resources to help people living with breathlessness.

There are two other booklets in this particular series:

- **Coping with shortness of breath**
- **Managing breathlessness**

The Institute of Cancer Research, in partnership with Macmillan, produced **Relax and breathe**, a relaxation CD for people experiencing breathlessness. This is also available as an audio tape.

To order any of the series call **0800 500 800** or to talk to someone about cancer call **0808 808 2020**.

The **Living with cancer** series is a range of booklets giving you the information you need if you are living with or are affected by cancer.

Other booklets available in the series:

- The cancer guide
- Men and cancer
- Talking to children when an adult has cancer
- I'm still me: a guide for young people living with cancer
- Cancer survivor's guide: because cancer doesn't end when your treatment is over
- Palliative care: practical help in advanced cancer
- Palliative care: emotional support in advanced cancer
- When someone with cancer is dying

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Macmillan Cancer Support improves the lives of people affected by cancer. We provide practical, medical, emotional and financial support and push for better cancer care. One in three of us will get cancer. 1.2 million of us are living with it. We are all affected by cancer. We can all help. We are Macmillan.

**For further copies, call us on 0800 500 800  
or visit [www.be.macmillan.org.uk](http://www.be.macmillan.org.uk)**

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