

Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments

Many people with cancer have breathlessness. It can be very distressing. Breathlessness can be caused by the cancer or by cancer treatments. This information sheet answers common questions and highlights ways of coping with cancer-related breathlessness.

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness is felt by everyone during heavy exercise, when the lungs, heart and muscles need to work harder. We are all used to this sort of breathlessness in our daily lives.

Breathlessness can also occur with some illnesses. This type of breathlessness can occur with light exercise or even when resting. It can affect a person's daily activities. It can also cause feelings of panic or anxiety, which make the breathlessness worse.

Some people describe it as 'shortness of breath'. The medical term for breathlessness is dyspnoea.

How does it feel?

Some people feel tightness in their chest; others have a feeling of 'just not getting enough air'.

When people are breathless, their breathing may become faster or more shallow than normal.

How does it affect you?

Breathlessness can:

- mean you avoid doing certain things because you are afraid of getting breathless
- make you feel stressed, frustrated or anxious
- make you very tired
- change how you feel about yourself
- mean that you deal differently with people and tasks
- affect sexual and close relationships.

What causes it?

Different illnesses can cause breathlessness.

It can happen when the lungs are affected by cancer. Sometimes fluid collects around the lung. Airways can become blocked or narrow.

It can happen if chemotherapy or radiotherapy causes lung damage or scarring.

Breathlessness can be caused by chest infections.

It can be caused by anaemia, when your blood carries less oxygen. Anaemia can also lead to tiredness, fatigue, paleness and a higher risk of infection.

Some chronic diseases of the lungs or the heart can also cause breathlessness, such as asthma, emphysema and heart failure.

People with cancer often lose fitness over the course of their treatment, because they do less than they would normally do. This can lead to breathlessness.

Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments

People who smoke or used to smoke often have breathlessness. If you would like help to quit smoking, contact the Quitline on 13 7848.

What can be done?

Breathlessness can often be treated. Your doctor will be able to discuss treatment with you.

The cause needs to be found and treated. Examples of treatments include:

- blood transfusions for anaemia
- draining any fluid around the lungs
- antibiotics for chest infection.

Rehabilitation programs can help. Exercise can decrease your breathlessness so that you are able to do more of the things that you would normally do.

If breathlessness becomes severe, the doctor can prescribe oxygen. If needed, oxygen can often be provided to people's homes, which helps them to lead normal lives.

Some people require medication to manage their breathlessness. Morphine in low doses can relieve the feeling of being short of breath and also help manage the fear of being breathless. Side effects may include constipation and a little drowsiness.

How do people cope?

Here are some ideas that may help you to cope.

Tips for managing daily activities

- Increase airflow by opening windows or having a fan in the room.
- Try to avoid bending down.
- Wear loose clothing around your waist and chest.

- Stay as active as you can. This will help you maintain your strength and prevent your muscles becoming weaker.
- Don't try to do everything at once. Pace activities throughout the day or break them up into smaller tasks to conserve energy. When you plan your day, include rest times.
- Place chairs in safe positions around the house so that you can sit down in between activities or when moving from one room to another.
- Get all your clothes ready and have them in one place before you shower or bathe. This will save your energy after you finish in the shower or bath. Sit down to dry and dress yourself.
- Pause before speaking and after each sentence.
- Drink plenty of fluids. Being dehydrated can increase breathlessness.
- Consider using a wheelchair for long distances if you find you are staying at home all the time because of your breathlessness.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help!

Positioning

It is important to find a position that is comfortable for you.

Find a comfortable position that supports your shoulders and relaxes your upper chest.

Some examples include:



Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments



Controlled breathing

Learning to control your breathing will help you to breathe on a more relaxed and gentle way. You can use this technique throughout the day, or when you find you have become breathless.

- Sit in a comfortable position with your back well supported. Relax your shoulders by resting your hands on your thighs and sighing out. This allows your shoulders to fall naturally.
- Place your hand on your belly (abdomen) and give a little cough. The feeling under your hand is your diaphragm contracting. The diaphragm is a muscle that sits under your lungs and controls breathing.
- Breathe in gently and feel your hand on your belly moving out. Breathe out and feel your hand moving in.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out gently through your mouth. Make your outward breath twice as long as your inward breath.

Practise this exercise several times a day. Repeat the exercise 5 – 10 times a session.

Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments

Sex and intimacy

People with breathlessness can continue to enjoy sex.

- Try different times of the day and find out when you have more energy for sex.
- If you use medication for pain or breathlessness, take this one hour before sex.
- Different positions will change your feelings of breathlessness. Lying in a more upright position, using pillows for support or being on top may help you to feel more sexually confident.
- Enjoy sensual touch and massage as this does not require strenuous activity.

For more information see www.cancervic.org.au or call **13 11 20** for the Cancer Council's booklet on sexuality and cancer.

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can be very helpful to reduce anxiety and manage breathlessness. There are different techniques that you can try. For more information see the Cancer Council's information sheet *Learning to Relax*.

Occupational therapists and physiotherapists at your hospital or community health centre may be able to suggest further ways to relax.

When should I speak to the doctor or nurse?

Speak to your doctor before beginning an exercise program. Ask about managing breathlessness and living as normal a life as possible.

Tell your doctor or nurse if:

- your breathlessness becomes worse
- you have any pain with your breathlessness
- you feel dizzy or faint
- you develop a cough, or cough up a fluid (phlegm) or the phlegm changes in colour, amount or consistency
- you have trouble swallowing or cough when you eat or drink.

Further information

For more information, contact the Cancer Helpline on **13 11 20**.

References are available on request.

Reviewed by Annie Angle, cancer nurse (Dip. Oncology Nursing, Royal Marsden, London) November 2010.

