

# Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments

This information sheet covers common questions and highlights ways of reducing and coping with cancer related breathlessness. It is a common and distressing sensation, experienced by many people with cancer. Breathlessness can be caused by the cancer or by cancer treatments and other medical conditions.

## What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness is an unpleasant awareness of difficulty with breathing. Some people describe it as 'shortness of breath'. The medical term for breathlessness is dyspnoea.

It is felt by everyone during heavy exercise and is a normal response to increased work of the lungs, heart and muscles. We are all accustomed to this sort of breathlessness and cope with it in our daily lives.

Breathlessness can also occur as a result of medical conditions. This type of breathlessness occurs with less vigorous exertion or even at rest.

This type of breathlessness can affect your daily activities. It can affect all aspects of your life. It can also cause feelings of panic or anxiety that make your breathlessness worse.

## How does it feel?

People have different experiences of breathlessness. Some people describe tightness in their chest; others describe it as 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 cause you to avoid certain activities due to fear of breathlessness.
- It can make you feel stressed, frustrated or anxious.
- Breathlessness can make you very tired.
- It can alter how you feel about yourself.
- It can alter your relationships and how you communicate and interact with others.
- It can affect sexual and intimate relationships in your life.

## What causes it?

A range of medical conditions can cause breathlessness.

- Breathlessness is often caused when the lungs are directly affected by cancer. Sometimes this is due to fluid collecting around the lung or due to airway blockages and narrowing.

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- It can also be a side effect of some chemotherapy or radiotherapy treatments that cause temporary or permanent lung damage or scarring.
- Breathlessness can be caused by some short-term medical conditions such as chest infections or anaemia (a reduced ability of the blood to carry oxygen). Anaemia can also cause tiredness and fatigue, paleness and a poor resistance to infection.
- Some chronic diseases of the lungs or the heart can also cause breathlessness – such as asthma, emphysema and heart failure – especially if oxygen levels are low.
- Prolonged inactivity can cause the heart and muscles to be less fit (deconditioning). Deconditioning is common in people with cancer. Rehabilitation programs can improve (reverse) deconditioning.
- People who smoke, or have a history of cigarette smoking often experience breathlessness. If you would like more information on quitting, or assistance to quit, contact the Quitline on 13 7848.

### What can be done?

Treatments are available for some causes of breathlessness and examples of these have been given below. You should discuss this with your doctor.

It is important to treat any underlying cause for breathlessness. Treatment can include blood transfusions for anaemia, drainage of any fluid compressing the heart or lungs and antibiotics for chest infection.

Rehabilitation programs can have wide ranging benefits. Exercise can decrease your breathlessness and increase your ability to perform tasks throughout the day.

If breathlessness becomes severely restricting, oxygen therapy can be prescribed. Oxygen can be provided to your home if your situation meets certain requirements. This can help people maintain their activity levels and alleviate breathlessness.

Some people require ongoing medication management of their breathlessness. Morphine in low doses can relieve the sensation of being short of breath and also assist in managing the fear that often accompanies the breathlessness. Side effects may include constipation and a little drowsiness.

### How do people cope?

People usually find a combination of techniques help to manage breathlessness and minimise the effects it has on their life.

### Tips for managing daily activities

- Increase airflow in the home by opening windows or having a fan in the room.
- Try to avoid bending down.
- Wear loose clothing around your waist and chest.
- It is important to stay as active as you can. This will help you maintain your strength and prevent your muscles becoming weaker.
- Pace activities throughout the day or break them up into smaller tasks to conserve energy. When you plan your day include rest times.
- Pause before speaking and after each sentence.
- Ensure that you drink plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration, as this can increase your breathlessness.
- Consider using a wheelchair for long distances if your breathlessness limits your ability to leave your home.

### Positioning

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

You may already know of a position that reduces your shortness of breath. It is important to find a position that is comfortable for you.

Some examples include:



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## **Controlled Breathing**

Learning to control your breathing will allow a more relaxed and gentle breathing pattern. It is a technique you can use regularly throughout the day, or in a situation when you find you have become breathless.

Controlled breathing involves relaxing the upper chest and shoulders and breathing at a rate that is comfortable for you, using the lower chest.

- 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 abdomen (belly) and give a little cough. The feeling under your hand is due to your diaphragm muscle contracting. The diaphragm is a domed muscle that sits under your lungs and controls breathing.
- Breathe in gently and let your hand move outwards using your diaphragm and abdominal muscles.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out gently through your mouth. Make your breath out twice as long as your breath in.

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- Remember your belly goes out as you breathe in and in as you breathe out. Count if you need to.
- Practice this exercise several times a day. Repeat the exercise 5-10 times a session.

### **Sex and intimacy**

People with breathlessness can continue to enjoy sexual and intimate times alone or with a partner.

- Try different times of the day to be intimate.
- If you use medication for pain or breathlessness, take this one hour beforehand.
- Be aware that 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 on sex and intimacy refer to the Cancer Council's information booklet *Sexuality and cancer*.

### **Relaxation technique**

Relaxation techniques can be very helpful to reduce anxiety and manage the experience of breathlessness. There are a variety of techniques that you can try. For more information on relaxation refer to 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 cope with your situation.

### **When should I speak to the doctor or nurse?**

Speak to your doctor before beginning an exercise program. Discuss other ways of managing breathlessness and living as normal a life as possible.

Tell your doctor or nurse if:

- your breathlessness becomes worse
- you have any pain associated with your breathlessness

- you feel dizzy or faint
- you produce phlegm in your cough or your phlegm changes in colour, amount or consistency
- you cough when you eat or drink or have trouble swallowing.

**For more information contact the Cancer Council Helpline on 13 11 20 (cost of a local call). This is a confidential service staffed by cancer nurses. Information is available in languages other than English.**

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