



Coping with breathlessness caused by cancer or cancer treatments

Many people with cancer have breathlessness. This fact 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.

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.

Being short of breath can be very uncomfortable.

How does it affect you?

Being short of breath can have a big impact on what you can do each day. Some people may be too breathless to shower, clean, cook, eat or even

sleep. The most basic daily tasks become too hard to do. Most people say this is frustrating and frightening.

Some people worry that being breathless means their cancer is getting worse. This can be true for some people but certainly not everyone.

It is important you let your doctor know as soon as possible if you are feeling breathless. They will most likely be able to give you some treatment to help your breathing.

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. The people most likely to suffer breathlessness are people with lung cancer, mesothelioma or cancer that has spread to the lung. Other types of cancer can also cause breathing problems, although this is less common.

People with cancer can become breathless if:

- fluid has collected around their lung/s
- their airways are blocked or narrow
- chemotherapy or radiotherapy has caused lung damage or scarring
- they have a chest infection
- they have anaemia (when your blood carries less oxygen)
- they have lost fitness during their course of treatment (because they do less exercise than they would normally do)
- they are or have been a smoker. (For help to quit smoking, contact the Quitline on 13 78 48).

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

Symptoms

If you are suffering from breathlessness, you may first notice it when walking uphill or upstairs. Some people can even notice it at rest.

You may also notice one or a few of the following symptoms:

- difficulty catching your breath
- noisy breathing or a wheeze
- fast, shallow breaths
- using your upper chest muscles and shoulders to help you breathe
- an increase in your heart rate
- pain in your chest when you breathe in
- pale, bluish skin in extreme breathlessness, especially around your mouth
- flaring nostrils when you breathe in
- anxiety or panicky feelings.

What can be done?

Once the cause of breathlessness is found, it can often be treated. Your doctor will be able to discuss treatment with you.

Examples of treatments include:

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

- rehabilitation programs. 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 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:



Controlled breathing

Learning to control your breathing will help you to breathe in 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.

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 a copy of Cancer Council's booklet *Sexuality and Cancer* visit www.cancervic.org.au or call 13 11 20.

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques can be very helpful to reduce anxiety and manage breathlessness. There are different techniques that you can try.

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

For a copy of Cancer Council's fact sheet **Learning to Relax** visit www.cancervic.org.au or call **13 11 20**.

When should I speak to a 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.

More information and support

For more information and support call **13 11 20** to speak to a cancer nurse, Monday to Friday, 9 am – 5 pm (cost of a local call, except from mobiles).

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