Taking Charge of Your Breathlessness

Patient Information –what you can do to help with breathlessness

We have developed this guide to support people experiencing breathlessness. This advice may not be suitable for everyone. If you need further advice, please contact your GP or health professional.

The ABCs of breathlessness:

A

ACTIVITY – *it is important to remember to stay as active as **you** can.*

Avoiding activities that make you breathless weakens your muscles and can actually lead to an increase in the feeling of breathlessness over time. Instead of avoiding activities, try using planning and pacing to help:

- Planning: Think about which activities make you feel breathless. Plan in advance for these activities, and spread them throughout the day. Be sure to rest in between activities if you need to. If there is an activity that makes you feel especially breathless, for example hoovering or changing the bed covers, take it slowly, and ask for help if you need it.

- Pacing: Pace yourself and take breaks if you start feeling breathless. You can use the '50% rule' to help. For example, if climbing a flight of stairs leaves you feeling very breathless, try climbing 50% of the way up and taking a break to catch your breath before continuing up the rest of the stairs. This will help you to manage the stairs without feeling like you are gasping for breath.

B

BREATHING – You can learn to control your breathing when you feel breathless using a technique that singers use called diaphragm breathing *(also known as tummy breathing*).

Before you start

- Relax your shoulders and arms as this saves energy.
- Place both hands on your tummy, just above your belly button
- Let your elbows rest in by your sides.

Spend as long as you need on each of the following points:

- Feel the rise and fall of your tummy and hands
  - As you **breathe in,** allow your tummy to **swell**.

This guide was developed with our clinical partners at Guy's and St Thomas's NHS Foundation Trust and King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

- As you **breathe out,** relax and let your tummy **fall.**
- If possible, breathe **in** through your nose and **out** through your mouth. Narrow your mouth slightly, if it helps.
- As you breathe out, let your upper chest **relax** a little more.
- Breathe in and out **smoothly** and **quietly**; take only the air you need.
- **Pause** as comfortable after each breath out.
- Stay still for a minute after you have got your breath back before moving.

C CALM, COOL, AND IN CONTROL

- **Keep calm**: If you panic, the breathlessness will get worse so try to stay as calm as possible. Relax, drop your shoulders and breathe out.

- **Keep cool**: Many people find that keeping cool or having air blowing on the middle of their face helps to reduce the feeling of breathlessness. You can do this by using a handheld fan, opening a window, or cooling your face with cold water (ideally with a fine water spray or mist).

- **Take control by positioning:** When you become breathless there are a few positions which will help you get your breath back more quickly. These positions allow you to rest your breathing muscles more effectively and help your shoulders to relax which saves precious energy.

- Try some of these positions and see which one is most helpful for when your breathing is difficult.

Relaxed sitting

Forward lean sitting

Forward lean standing

Images courtesy of Addenbroke's, Hospital, Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

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Relaxation Poem

For use when feeling breathless

Be Still... Be calm....
Drop the shoulders
Slowly sigh Out...and...Out
Hear the sigh Haaah....
...soft and quiet
Feel control returning
Peaceful and safe

With thanks to Jenny Taylor,
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