

## Breathlessness

### Fact sheet

Breathlessness or shortness of breath, also known as dyspnoea (dis-nee-a), is very common in people with lung disease, or who are very weak and ill.

Feeling breathless makes most people anxious. You become tense, tighten your shoulders, chest and stomach muscles, and take fast shallow gasps of air.

Breathing this way takes a lot of effort; it doesn't get much air into your lungs, and sets up a cycle of fear and breathlessness. Trying to cope with this alone is very difficult.

By working with your health care team breathlessness can be eased and you can feel more comfortable.

#### **What causes breathlessness?**

In palliative care, breathlessness is most often seen in people with advanced heart or lung disease, cancer of the lung, or any cancer that has spread to the lung.

The damage caused by these diseases means the body can't deliver the energy necessary for normal activity.

It feels as though you cannot get air as easily as you used to.

This is most noticeable at times when your body needs more energy, for example:

- walking, showering, getting dressed;
- when you have infection, fever, or anaemia (low red blood cell count);
- straining when constipated; or
- when you feel isolated, upset, or panicky.

#### **What can be done about it?**

Breathlessness can be managed.

Sometimes the underlying cause can be treated, such as a chest infection or if there is fluid on the lung.

There are practical things you can do, such as using simple breathing techniques, and spacing out the activities in your day.

There is medication that can improve the way you feel, so that you can be more comfortable and relaxed.

#### **How can I help myself?**

The first thing is to remember that slower deep breaths supply more air than fast shallow breaths.

Try this breathing control method:

- Drop your shoulders...Let them sink right down and feel heavy and relaxed...breathe in quietly...You'll feel your lower ribs and maybe your stomach move out a bit.

- Let this movement grow gently as you breathe - the movement should be near your waist, not near your shoulders - and breathe out gently through pursed lips.
- Be aware of your breathing pattern. It is easy to hold your breath during an activity without realising it.

Be aware of when your breathing is most comfortable. This is usually when you are sitting upright and supported, or leaning forward and being supported by a table or bench.

### General things that can help

- Cool air flowing over your face from an open window, electric fan, ceiling fan or hand held fan.
- Distraction such as reading, company, music, TV or radio.
- Plan your day so that you do not have to rush.
- Allow time to rest before, during and after any activity, especially those you know will make you breathless.
- Notice the time of day when you are the least breathless and use that time for the things you know are physically demanding or important.
- Wear clothing that is loose and comfortable, not tight.
- Avoid constipation.
- Place chairs around the house, for example halfway along a hallway, so that you can sit and rest when you need to.
- Let other people help with physically taxing tasks.
- Learning some relaxation techniques, for example meditation and visualisation.
- Sleep in a more upright position to allow your lungs more room to expand.

### Help from the health care team

Your **doctor** can help by identifying the cause of your breathlessness, and prescribing medication and sometimes treatment to relieve the symptoms or reverse the cause.

They can also write you a plan of what to do for times when your breathlessness increases, so that you can manage it yourself.

The **nurse** can explain how to use your medications to get the most out of them, and how to reduce the demands on your breathing. Practical assistance can be arranged for showering and dressing, and some household chores.

The **physiotherapist** can show you ways to control your breathing and get the most out of each breath.

The **social worker** can help you work through your feelings and worries, and support you in finding solutions.

The **occupational therapist** can help with practical ways to make everyday tasks easier.

The **hospice volunteer** can provide companionship on a regular basis.

### Medication

Breathlessness and anxiety can become a vicious cycle with each making the other worse. Your doctor can prescribe medication which will help you to break the cycle and give you some control over both of these.

Common medications prescribed are:

- Small doses of morphine to slow down the rate of your breathing, making it deeper and more efficient.
- Anti anxiety medicines which work to relax breathing by calming the breathing control centre in the brain.

Concerns about addiction and dependence are often raised, but there is no evidence that this is the case when using them to relieve breathlessness.

## Can Oxygen help?

Many people assume that if they feel breathless, extra oxygen is necessary to make them feel better, but this is not always the case.

The combination of modifying daily routines, good breathing and relaxation techniques, and medication, will usually provide relief.

It has been proven that the movement of air across our nostrils relieves the feeling of breathlessness.

Oxygen therapy is only useful for people with advanced lung disease where tests show that their blood oxygen levels are lower than is healthy.

In these situations, extra oxygen may be prescribed by your doctor.

There are drawbacks to having oxygen therapy which need to be carefully considered:

- Its use can create dependence on both the oxygen, the equipment that delivers it, and power supply. You may feel the oxygen is absolutely necessary, and be very anxious if you don't have it to hand.
- Using oxygen restricts your freedom of movement – you can only go where the tubing reaches. The tubing may also get in the way and lead to tripping and falling.
- The constant flow of the oxygen can be uncomfortable, making your nose crusty and your throat dry, making you cough more.
- The nasal prongs and tubing can make your nose and the top of your ears sore.
- The noise of the equipment in the house can keep you and others awake at night.

Oxygen therapy is not a blanket remedy for breathlessness, and is only a part of the treatment available.

## Acknowledgement

Breathing control techniques reproduced with permission from the pulmonary rehab kit, <http://www.pulmonaryrehab.com.au>

## Related Fact Sheets

Nil

### CONTACT DETAILS

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