



Helping you understand and cope with breathlessness

Information for patients
and families



This leaflet explains the causes and symptoms of breathlessness and gives general advice on how to cope with, and manage, your condition.

Why do I get breathlessness?

Breathlessness can occur for a number of reasons:

- Narrowing of the airways in the lungs making it difficult for air to get in and out
- If a part of your lungs is not working properly
- An inability to cough up phlegm if you have a chest infection
- If you have been unwell for a long time because your body is weaker
- If you suffer from heart disease

What are the signs?

- Feeling short of breath
- Lack of energy or increased tiredness
- Stopping to hold onto furniture to help catch your breath
- Feeling dizzy
- Wheezing
- Using your shoulders and upper chest to help you breathe
- Faster breathing rate

What can I do?

Feeling breathless can be a frightening experience, but there are many things you can do to make the situation better. **Your relative can also support you in doing these exercises.** The following breathing techniques will help:

Breathing control

Your airways are very sensitive and can feel tight and wheezy especially after coughing or when you are breathless. Breathing control is used to relax the airways and relieve these symptoms.

How?

Get into a comfortable position, with your arms supported let your shoulders and body relax.

- Put one hand on your chest and the other on your tummy
- Close your eyes to help you relax and focus on your breathing
- Slowly breathe in through your nose, with your mouth closed. If you're relaxed, the air will reach further into your lungs. Your tummy will move out against your hand. If your breathing is controlled, the hand on your chest will hardly move
- Breathe out through your mouth. Your tummy will fall gently. Imagine all the tension in your body leaving as you let the air out

Try to use as little effort as possible and make your breaths slow, relaxed and smooth. With each breath out, try to feel more relaxed and calm, gradually breathe more slowly.

Breathing techniques

Use breathing control combined with any of these breathing techniques:

Pursed-lips breathing

This can be used at any time to help you control your breathing. This helps to empty all the air out of your lungs and is especially useful for people with COPD as the narrowed airways can trap air in the lungs.

How?

Breathe in gently through your nose, then purse your lips as though you're going to blow out a candle. Blow out with your lips in this position. Blow out only for as long as is comfortable – don't force your lungs to empty.

Blow-as-you-go

Helps make tasks and activities easier, use it while you're doing something that makes you breathless.

How?

Breathe in before you make the effort. Then breathe out while you're making the effort. e.g. when standing up, breathe in **before** you stand up, and then blow out **as** you stand up. Try using pursed-lips as you blow out.

How else can I cope?

Being short of breath can make day to day living difficult. Here are a few other things you can do that might help you with your breathlessness.

- **Pacing yourself** is a good way of managing your breathing and staying in control. Break down activities into smaller ones or spread them throughout the day. e.g. if you are climbing the stairs, stop and get your breath halfway or on every other step. Always allow rest time between activities.
- **Prioritising and planning** can help conserve your energy for the activities that are most

important to you. Thinking about what you are going to do beforehand will ensure you don't waste your energy on unnecessary activities. Only do the things you have to and that are important to you.

- **Exercise helps** you keep as fit and mobile as possible. It is normal to feel breathless when exercising.
- **Useful positions** can help expand the lungs and make breathing easier, for example leaning on a chair, sitting down on a chair and bending forwards, or sitting down and then resting your head in your arms on a desk (see diagram).



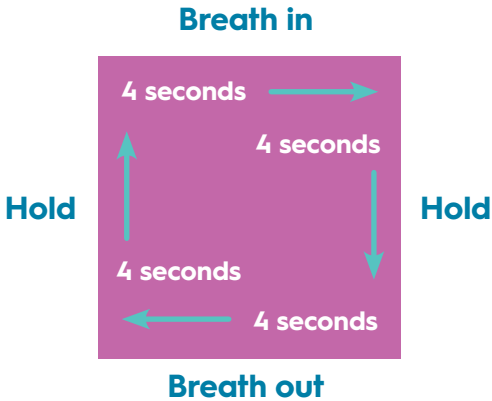
What if my breathing gets worse because I am anxious?

Here are a few things you can try:

Visualisation – distract yourself by thinking about a favourite place or a happy memory.

Relaxation – find a comfortable place to sit down, then close your eyes and practice relaxing every part of your body in turn.

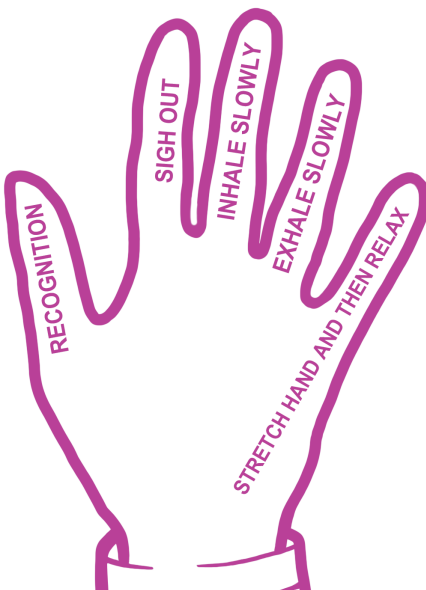
Box breathing – is a simple technique sit with your back supported in a comfortable chair and feet on the floor. Close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose while slowly counting to four, feel the air enter your lungs. Hold your breath inside while counting slowly to four, then begin to slowly exhale for 4 seconds. Repeat steps 1 to 3 at least three times. Repeat until calm returns. (See diagram overleaf).



Repeating positive phrases – thinking or saying out loud phrases such as “this feeling will soon pass” or counting can help.

Using a fan – directing a handheld or full size fan onto your face, or sitting by an open window, can reduce breathlessness. **NB: if you are suspected, presumed or diagnosed with COVID-19, do not use a fan**

The Calming Hand – grab each digit on your hand in turn as you carry out the actions in the diagram. Doing this a few times over will help you to relax.





How can Trinity help?

We run a number of groups to help people manage their breathlessness. They are informative, friendly and fun. Our classes include:

Breathe Better Group – helps you manage your breathlessness and fatigue includes discussions, breathing exercises, chair based exercises and relaxation techniques.

Exercise Groups – exercise for people with different abilities to improve your overall strength and wellbeing.

All our classes are free and you can either ask your Trinity nurse or physiotherapist or you can contact the A&R team on **020 7787 1062**.

Please be aware that the information in this leaflet does not replace individual assessment and advice so always check with your GP, nurse or physiotherapist if you are worried.

How to contact Trinity

Royal Trinity Hospice

30 Clapham Common North Side
London SW4 0RN

Call **020 7787 1000**

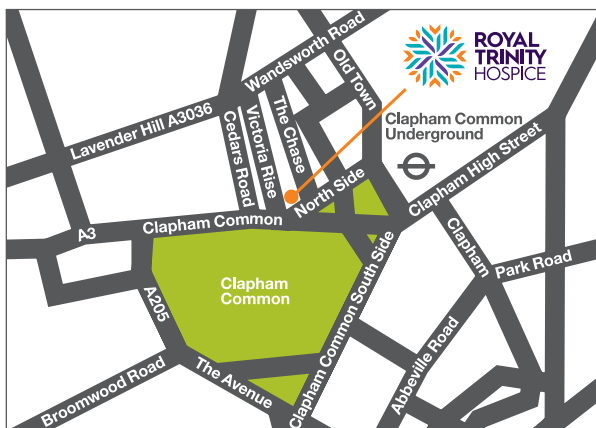
Email **enquiries@royaltrinityhospice.london**

www.royaltrinityhospice.london

 @trinityhospice

 RoyalTrinityHospice

 @royaltrinityhospice



If you would like this information in a different format, such as large print, please speak to the Communications team on 020 7787 1000 or email media@royaltrinityhospice.london

Royal Trinity Hospice will always store your personal details securely.
For full details see our privacy policy:
www.royaltrinityhospice.london/privacy

Charity no. 1013945

Date of publication March 2020

