



Managing breathlessness

Reviewed: July 2026
Next review: July 2027
Version 2

About this leaflet

The purpose of this leaflet is to help you with techniques to manage breathlessness.

Being short of breath can be uncomfortable and stressful, however, there are techniques you can use make it easier. These can help you control your breathing and make you feel less breathless.

Abdominal/diaphragmatic breathing

Abdominal, or diaphragmatic, breathing pulls air into the bottom of your lungs using a muscle called the diaphragm, which is a large flat muscle at the bottom of your ribcage.

Diaphragmatic breathing reduces the feeling of breathlessness and helps pull more air into your lungs.

Step-by-step guide to diaphragmatic breathing:

1. Lie or sit in a position that is comfortable for you and relax your neck and shoulders.
2. Put a hand on your chest and the other on your tummy and slowly breathe in and out.
3. When you take a breathe in, try and take in a little more air than before – feel your tummy move out.
4. Pause. Slowly breathe out - feel your tummy move in.
5. Repeat as many times as you find comfortable.

Diaphragmatic breathing can also be used at any time and in any place.

Pursed lip breathing

Pursed lip breathing keeps your airways open for longer, meaning more air moves in and out and is a safe and easy way to get more air into your lungs.

Step-by-step guide to pursed lip breathing:

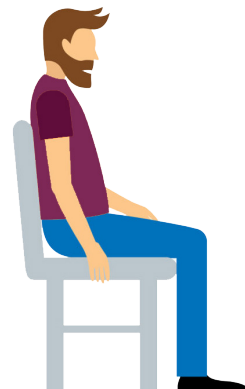
1. Breathe slowly in through your nose counting to 3.
2. Purse your lips, as if you are going to blow out candles. Slowly breathe out counting to 4 and breathe out for longer than you breathed in.
3. Repeat as many times as you feel comfortable.

You can practice pursed lip breathing whenever you are short of breath, e.g. when you are walking or going up or down stairs.

Positions to help shortness of breath



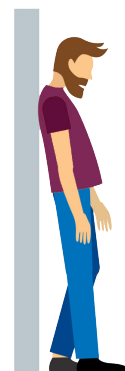
Sitting leaning forward
Sitting forward with your arms resting on your legs.



Sitting upright
Relax your arms on the arms of the chair or on your legs.



Standing leaning forwards
Find somewhere to lean for support, e.g. a chair, kitchen worktop or window sill. If you are out and about you could use a walking stick, umbrella or shopping trolley to lean on.



Standing against a wall
With your feet hip width apart, lean backwards or sideways against a wall. Let your arms and hands relax by your sides.



Leaning on a table
Rest your head and arms on a pillow on top of a table.



Side lying
Lie on your side with pillows under your head. Bend your top leg, or both legs.

Using a handheld fan

A handheld fan may help with breathlessness.

Hold the fan about 6 inches (15cm) from your face and aim towards the middle of your face so you feel the air at the sides of your nose and above your lips.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of paying full attention to the present moment — noticing your thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations without judgment. When you're feeling breathless, it's common to become anxious, which can make your breathing feel even more difficult. Mindfulness can help you stay calm and focused, reducing anxiety and improving your breathing control.

By practicing mindfulness regularly, you may find it easier to:

- Stay relaxed during episodes of breathlessness
- Reduce panic and stress related to breathing difficulties
- Improve your overall sense of wellbeing

Simple mindfulness techniques you can try include:

- Focusing on your breath as it moves in and out
- Noticing the sensations in your body without trying to change them
- Using guided mindfulness exercises to help you relax

Helpful resources

Apps

- Headspace (offers guided mindfulness and breathing exercises)
- Calm (includes relaxation and breathing sessions)
- Insight Timer (free app with a wide range of mindfulness meditations)

Websites

Scan the QR code with your device or visit the web address listed below to access these mindfulness websites.

Mindful

Articles and guided practices



 <https://www.mindful.org/>

NHS Every Mind Matters

Tips and exercises for mindfulness and stress management



 <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/>

Pacing

Pacing means balancing activity with rest to avoid getting too tired or breathless. When you do too much at once, your breathing can become harder to control. By slowing down and breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps, you can reduce breathlessness and conserve your energy.

Try to plan activities with regular breaks, listen to your body, and stop before you feel out of breath. Using pacing techniques helps you stay active and improves your confidence in managing breathlessness day-to-day.

Contact

For further information, please contact Physiotherapy, Rehabilitation Department on **0141 951 5121** or email gjnh.heartandlungprehab@gjnh.scot.nhs.uk.

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