

## Managing breathlessness at home during the COVID-19 outbreak

Many pre-existing conditions, such as heart or lung diseases, cause breathlessness. Breathlessness can be very frightening and distressing, even in milder cases, and may be worsened by fears relating to the corona virus. During the current corona virus outbreak, you may have reduced access to your usual support networks. It is important that you continue the usual treatments for your underlying conditions (e.g. inhaler). **It's okay to contact your usual health and social care team for support.**

**If you think you may have corona virus, please use the 111 online corona virus service to find out what to do ([111.nhs.uk](https://111.nhs.uk)). If you are unable to use the online service, please phone 111.**

**The following steps may help you feel less breathless. You might find some of these steps more helpful than others. Try them out and use the ones that you find most helpful:**

### Finding a comfortable position can ease your breathlessness, try these:

Sit upright in a comfortable armchair with both arms supported on the chair arms or cushions. Let your shoulders drop and relax. Rest the soles of your feet on the floor.



Sit on a chair and let your body flop forwards. Rest both arms on a table or your knees to support you.



Lie on your side propped up with pillows under your upper body. Tuck the top pillow into your neck to support your head. Rest your top arm on a pillow placed in front of your chest and your top leg on another.



In your comfortable position, loosen your wrists, fingers and your jaw.

### Abdominal and tummy breathing

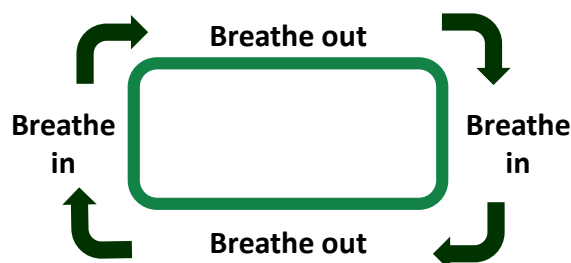
Rest a hand on your tummy and breathe in gently to feel your tummy rise. Then breathe out slowly through your nose or your mouth. Rest and wait for the next breath to come. You may find it helpful to purse your lips while you breathe out slowly as though you were making a candle flame flicker.

### Slowing down

When you are comfortable with the tummy breathing, try to slow down the speed of your breathing. When you slow down, your breathing becomes deeper, which is more efficient. Imagine air filling your tummy like a balloon. Practicing regularly will make it easier to do when you are breathless.

### Breathe a rectangle

- Once you have found a comfortable position, look around for a rectangle. This might be a window, a door, picture, or even a book or television screen.
- Now follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you breathe, breathing in on the short sides and out on the long sides.
- Gradually slow the speed that your eyes move round the rectangle, pausing at the corners to help slow your breathing.



## Cooling the face

Cooling the face, especially around the nose, can help reduce how breathless you feel. Try wiping a cool wet flannel on your nose and upper cheeks of your face. The use of fans is not being recommended during the coronavirus outbreak due to the risk of it spreading infection.

## Tips for living with breathlessness at home:



### When walking

- Move at a comfortable pace, and breathe steadily
- Avoid holding your breath, or trying to move or turn too fast
- Pace your breathing to your steps; breathe in over one step, breathe out over the next two steps
- Use walking aids if they help you
- Stop and rest whenever you need to.

### When climbing steps or stairs

- Use the handrail when climbing stairs and take the steps slowly. Try resting for at least five seconds every few steps.



### During day to day activities

- Keep things you use often close to hand
- Have a charged phone close to your bed or armchair
- Plan ahead with your chores or daily activities, such as bathing or housework
- Spread your activity throughout the day
- Have everything you need before you start an activity
- Rest between activities or when your breathing begins to feel uncomfortable.



### When feeling anxious

- Remember that this is a worrying time with a lot of uncertainty, so it is natural to feel worried
- There are many ways to deal with worried feelings. These include mindfulness, listening to relaxing music, or doing gentle activity such as gardening, yoga or singing.



### When eating and drinking

- Take small meals often, rather than one large one
- Eat smaller mouthfuls
- Avoid foods that are difficult to chew, add sauces when possible
- Drink sips of fluid often to avoid becoming dehydrated.



### Keep in touch

- Stay in touch with friends and relatives by using the phone and other technology and writing letters.



### Keep active

- It is important to stay as active as you can, to prevent your muscles becoming weaker.

## It's okay to ask for help.

Please continue to contact your usual health and social care teams if you need further support.

### Further Resources for people with breathlessness:

- Cicely Saunders Institute: [kcl.ac.uk/cicelysaunders/research/symptom/breathlessness](https://kcl.ac.uk/cicelysaunders/research/symptom/breathlessness)
- St Christopher's Hospice: [stchristophers.org.uk/videos/managing-breathlessness](https://stchristophers.org.uk/videos/managing-breathlessness)
- Hull York Medical School: [breathlessness.hyms.ac.uk](https://breathlessness.hyms.ac.uk)
- British Lung Foundation: [blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathlessness/how-to-manage-breathlessness](https://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/breathlessness/how-to-manage-breathlessness)
- Life of Breath Project: [lifeofbreath.org/category/resources](https://lifeofbreath.org/category/resources)

References: Bausewein et al. 2008. *Cochrane* CD005623; Brighton et al. *Thorax* 2019;74:270-1.  
Positioning images reproduced with permission of the Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service.

**How to cite this resource:** Higginson IJ, Maddocks M, Bayly J, Brighton LJ, Hutchinson A, Booth S, Ogden M, Farquhar M. on behalf of the NIHR Applied Research Collaborative Palliative and End of Life Care Theme. April 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020. Managing your breathlessness at home during the corona virus (COVID-19) outbreak.