

PATIENT INFORMATION - BREATHLESSNESS

Breathlessness is an unpleasant feeling of uncomfortable or difficult breathing. People say they feel puffed, short of breath or winded. The medical term is *dyspnoea*.

Feeling frightened and anxious is common for people who are breathless. These feelings can make your breathing worse. It is important to remind yourself that breathlessness is not in itself dangerous.

This information sheet helps you manage your long-term breathlessness. If your breathing is getting worse or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, it is important to seek advice from your doctor.

What can I do to help my breathlessness?

- **Make yourself aware of how you are breathing**

- When you breathe in, are you tensing your shoulders to lift your chest up?
- To breathe out, do you force the air out?
- Are you breathing very quickly?
- When you need to move, do you find yourself holding your breath?

- **Relax**

When you are feeling breathless you may automatically start to use your chest, shoulder and neck muscles, hoping it will make breathing easier. These muscles are not meant to work continuously for long periods of time, so they will soon become tense, sore and tired. If you can relax and rest these muscles while still getting the breaths you need, it will help to make you feel more comfortable and less distressed. The following steps will help you to achieve a more relaxed way of breathing:

- **Getting relaxed**

Feel which areas of your body are tensed up and try to loosen them. For example, unclench your jaw, let your shoulders relax and drop down. It helps if you or your carer can massage these areas of tension. Listening to relaxing music can also be very helpful.

- **Abdominal or tummy breathing**

This is a more relaxed way of breathing which is less tiring than using your upper chest, neck and shoulder muscles.

- With your shoulders relaxed, rest one hand gently on your stomach (just above your tummy button).
- Keep your shoulders relaxed and heavy; allow your hand to rise gently as you breathe in and out through your nose. It may help to imagine air filling your stomach like a balloon.
- Gently sigh the air out through your mouth.
- If your nose is blocked, breathe in and out through your mouth and discuss with your doctor how to unblock it.

PATIENT INFORMATION - BREATHLESSNESS

- **Slow down**

When you are comfortable with the abdominal breathing, try to slow down the speed of your breathing. Remember that when you slow down, your breathing becomes deeper, which is more efficient.

- **Walking and climbing stairs**

- Pace your breathing to your steps; breathe in over one step, breathe out over the next two steps.
- Move at a comfortable pace and breathe steadily. Avoid holding your breath or trying to move too fast.
- Use walking aids if they help you. Speak to your Hospice nurse who may refer you to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.
- Stop and rest whenever you need to.
- Have rest points at the top and bottom of the stairs and remember to count your breathing.
- Use the handrail when climbing stairs. Take the steps slowly and stop to rest when you feel the need to.

- **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.

- **Cool air**

Cooling your face with cold air or water reduces the feeling of breathlessness. You can use a small hand-held or standing fan, or simply a cool draught from an open window. You may prefer to use a cold flannel.

- **Plan**

A very important part of controlling breathlessness is to plan your activities. Decide your priorities and try not to do too much at once or in any one day. Some activities may fill you with dread as you know they are particularly difficult for you. In these cases try to ask for help. This may be frustrating for you, but will allow you to conserve your energy for the things that are important to you.

- **Pace**

Allow plenty of time and take breaks when you need them. Activity may increase your feeling of breathlessness but this is normal. It is important that you feel in control of your breathing before you start an activity, especially one which you find difficult. Pace yourself so that you don't get too breathless. Try to arrange furniture in convenient places to rest, such as an extra chair in the bathroom or hallway. Tasks involving carrying or bending are often very difficult, and you should ask for help or advice with these. You may also find it helpful to arrange your house so that items that you use often are kept within easy reach. If you are going out, know where you can rest and if possible take someone with you to carry the bags!

PATIENT INFORMATION - BREATHLESSNESS

- **Drugs that may help**

- **Morphine:** We usually think of morphine as a drug to treat pain, but it can also be very helpful for breathlessness. You will need a much smaller dose and sometimes you will take it less frequently than when used for pain relief.
- **Anxiety medications:** Sometimes medications used to treat anxiety are also prescribed for breathlessness. These may include Midazolam or Clonazepam.
- **Steroids:** Steroids may also be prescribed in some cases.

- **Oxygen**

Oxygen may help breathlessness in some people, but it does not help everyone. If your oxygen saturations (levels) are below 90%, you may be prescribed oxygen for use at home. This is arranged via the District Nursing Service. Discuss this with your Hospice nurse.