





Living with **breathlessness**

This booklet is for people who struggle with breathlessness, whether you've been diagnosed with a lung condition or not.

Breathlessness means that you may:

-  find it hard or uncomfortable to breathe most days
-  get breathless unexpectedly and feel you can't control your breathing.

The techniques in this booklet will help you to manage your breathing better.

If you often feel breathless but the cause has not been diagnosed yet, talk to your GP.

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What is breathlessness?

Getting out of breath is normal when you're being active. This is because your body needs more oxygen and energy during and after movement.

But sometimes you might get out of breath even when you're not being active. You may find it difficult or uncomfortable to breathe and feel like you cannot control your breathing.

If you're feeling more breathless than usual, call your GP surgery or NHS 111 to get medical advice.

If you or someone you're with is having severe difficulty breathing, do not delay getting help. **Call 999 or go to A&E.**

There are two types of breathlessness:

Chronic breathlessness – this can develop gradually and can last for weeks, months or even years.

Acute breathlessness – sometimes you might get suddenly and unexpectedly out of breath.

Your lung condition is not the only thing that affects how out of breath you feel. The way you breathe, feeling anxious about your breathing, and your lifestyle can also make you breathless.

The way you breathe

Poor breathing habits will make you feel more out of breath.

When you're out of breath, you may feel like you need more air. You may start to take more air into your lungs or breathe faster. As a result, you may not fully empty your lungs as you breathe out.

This means you might be using the top of your chest more to breathe, instead of using all of your lungs. Breathing like this takes more effort and you may feel more out of breath.

The breathing techniques in this booklet will help you to manage your breathing better (see pages 8 to 11).

Breathlessness and worry

Getting out of breath can be frightening. Feeling scared or anxious can make you feel more breathless.

As you get more anxious, you might become more aware of your breathing, breathe faster, and tense your breathing muscles. This can sometimes lead to a panic attack. A panic attack is when you have a sudden rush of intense mental and physical symptoms.

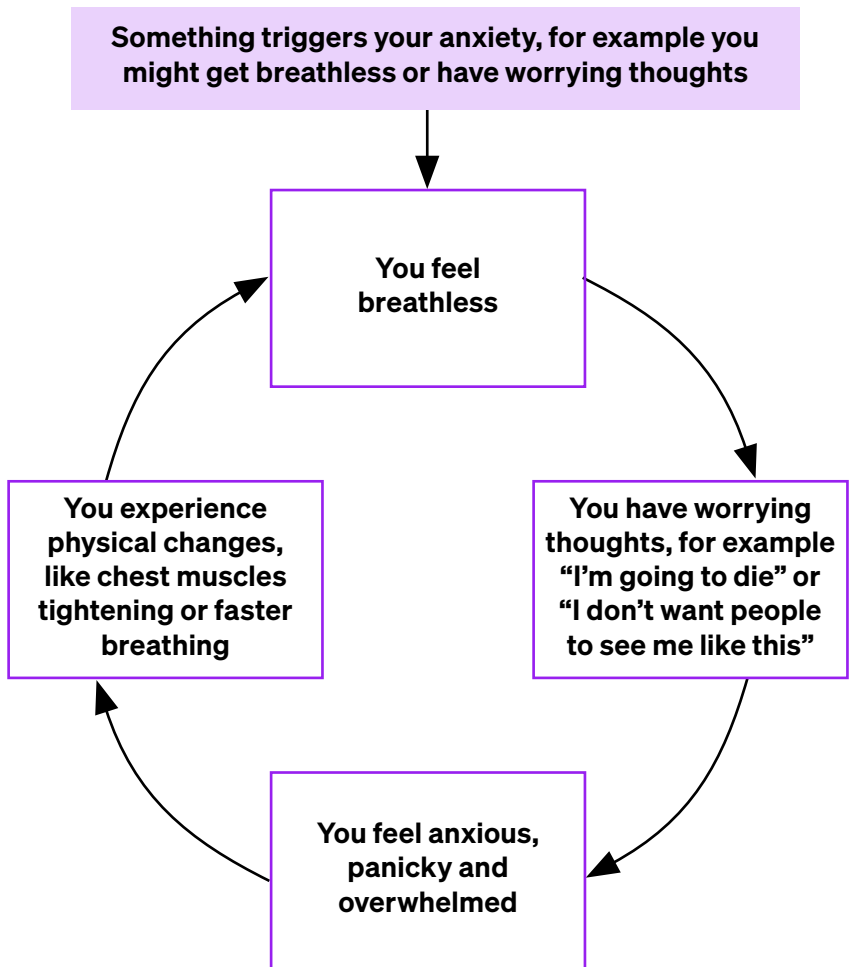
Staying calm

Learning to stay calm when you get breathless will help you to reduce the anxiety that can make it worse. You might find it helpful to try a calming activity like meditation or yoga.



Get help with your anxiety at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/anxiety](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/anxiety)

The diagram below shows the cycle between breathlessness and feelings of anxiety:



Diagnosing and treating breathlessness

If you're feeling breathless when you would not normally, your GP can refer you for breathing and lung function tests like Spirometry and FeNO (Fractional Exhaled Nitric Oxide). These can help find out what's causing your breathlessness.

Read more about breathing tests at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/breathing-tests](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/breathing-tests)

Your GP or healthcare professional will also want to know more about you:

- medical history
- smoking history
- body mass index (BMI).

You may also need other tests like electrocardiogram (ECG) and chest X-rays.

Treating breathlessness

Treatment will depend on what's causing your breathlessness. You may be prescribed medicines, or you may be referred to a course like PR (pulmonary rehabilitation). This will help to improve your muscle strength so you can breathe better.

The MRC breathlessness scale

Your GP may show you the MRC (Medical Research Council) breathlessness scale to help describe how breathless you get.

They will talk you through the scale and help you use it. Your grade is the one that best describes how breathless you feel in your day-to-day life.

Description	Grade
I only get breathless with strenuous exercise	0
I get short of breath when hurrying on level ground or walking up a slight hill	1
On level ground, I walk slower than people of my age because of breathlessness, or I have to stop for breath when walking at my own pace on the level	2
I stop for breath after walking about 100 yards or after a few minutes on level ground	3
I am too breathless to leave the house, or I am breathless when dressing and undressing	4

The MRC breathlessness scale does not cover other aspects of breathlessness, such as how you think or feel about getting out of breath. You can talk to your GP about these to get more support.

Ways to manage your breathlessness

There are different things you can do to help you feel less breathless. You may want to practice these when you're sitting down, feeling relaxed and are not out of breath. You'll then be able to use these techniques when you're short of breath or anxious.

Ask your physiotherapist or healthcare professional about the right ones for you. We have some videos to help you use these breathing techniques at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/breathing-techniques](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/breathing-techniques)

Blow as you go breathing

Use this technique while you're doing things that make you breathless:

- 1 Breathe in** before you make the effort, for example before lifting a heavy bag.
- 2 Breathe out** while you're making the effort, for example while lifting the heavy bag.

Pursed-lips breathing

You can use this technique to help control your breathing at any time.

- 1** Breathe in gently through your nose.
- 2** Purse your lips as if you're going to blow out a candle.
- 3** Breathe out with your lips in this pursed position. Imagine blowing out a candle or whistling when you breathe out.
- 4** Blow out for as long as is comfortable.
- 5** Do not force your lungs to empty.

Paced breathing

Paced breathing can be done using pursed-lips or blow as you go breathing. You can use it when you're being active. This technique helps you to avoid holding your breath.

- 1** Count to yourself while being active. For example, count one as you breathe in, then count to two as you breathe out. By slowing down your breath out, you're improving your breathing control.
- 2** Continue this as you're being active. As you get more practiced, try going up to a count of three when you breathe out.
- 3** Your counting should be in line with your pace while being active.

Relaxed breathing

Relaxed breathing helps you breathe more efficiently, using your tummy instead of your upper chest. To start, make sure you're sitting somewhere comfortable and relax your muscles, then:

- 1** Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach.
- 2** Close your eyes.
- 3** Slowly breathe in through your nose, with your mouth closed.
- 4** Count for as long as you can, up to five.
- 5** The air will reach low into your lungs if you're relaxed, and your tummy will move out with your hand.
- 6** The hand on your chest should hardly move.
- 7** Breathe out through your mouth, and your tummy will fall gently.
- 8** Gradually try to breathe more slowly. Your breath out should take longer than your breath in.

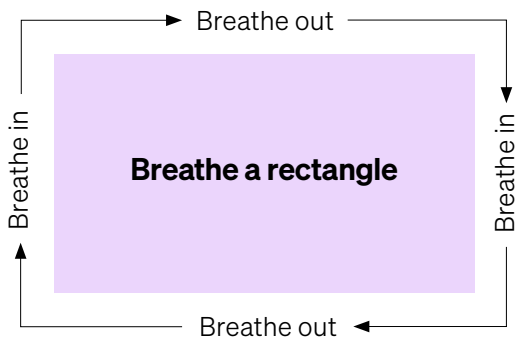
Breathe a rectangle

Once you've tried the relaxed breathing technique, you might find it useful to breathe a rectangle.

First, find something rectangle shaped, such as a TV, book or window frame.

Then follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you use relaxed breathing.

Gradually slow the speed at which your eyes move around the edge of the rectangle to slow your breathing.



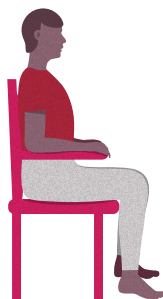
Positions to help you recover when you feel breathless

You can use these positions to help you recover when you're feeling breathless and to practice your breathing control.



Sit upright in a firm chair

If your chair does not have arms, rest your arms on the top of your legs. Let your wrists and hands relax.



Lean against a wall

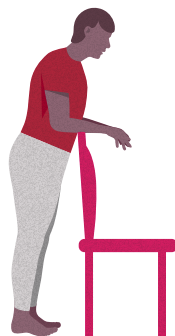
Lean back or sideways against a wall with your feet slightly apart. Let your hands rest loosely by your sides.





Stand leaning forward

Lean forward from your hips, with your arms resting on something, such as a chair or kitchen work surface. If you're out, you could lean on a walking stick or a frame with wheels. If you're shopping, use your supermarket trolley.



Sit leaning forward

Lean resting your elbows on your legs.



Sit leaning forward at a table

Rest your head and arms on pillows on a table when you're short of breath.



Side lying

Lie on your side with a pillow under your head. Your knee should be bent forward, or you can put a pillow between your legs.



High side lying

Lie on your side with pillows under your head and shoulders.



Living well with breathlessness



Making a few changes in your everyday habits can make a big difference to how you manage your breathlessness.

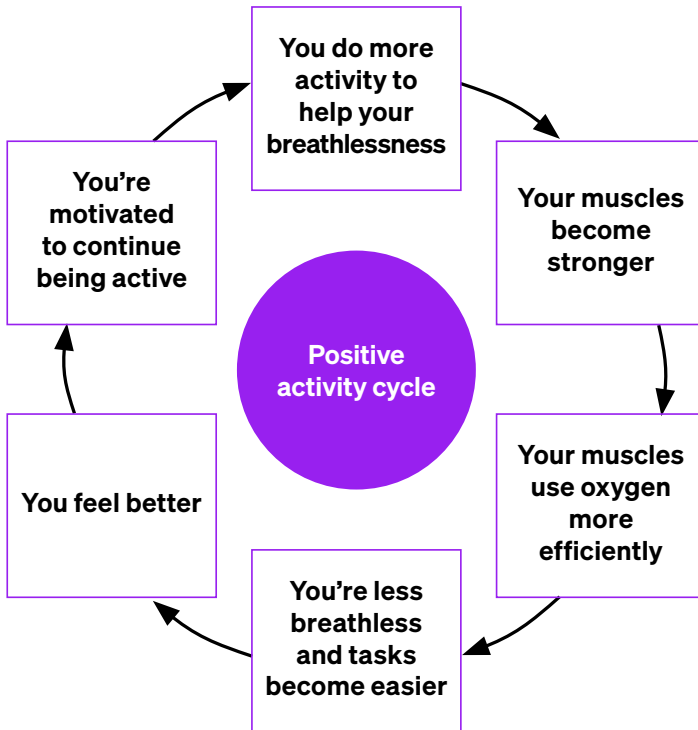
Tips to make everyday tasks easier

- 1 Plan your day and pace yourself to make sure you have plenty of time to rest.
- 2 Break down your activities into smaller tasks that are more manageable.
- 3 Find simple ways to cook, clean and do other chores. You could use a small table or cart with wheels to move things around your home, and a pole or tongs with long handles to reach things.
- 4 Use a towelling robe after showering or bathing, as you'll use less energy than drying yourself with a towel.
- 5 Hold a small battery fan near your face (about 6 inches away) – this can help you feel less breathless.
- 6 Put items that you use frequently in easy-to-reach places.
- 7 Keep your clothes loose, and wear clothes and shoes that are easy to take on and off.
- 8 Use a wheeled walking frame with a seat to help you be more active.
- 9 Never be afraid to ask for support when you need it.
- 10 Be patient with yourself and give yourself time to do things.

Keep as active as possible

You may worry about being active in case you feel more breathless, but it's important to stay calm and learn ways to manage and recover your breath. In fact, being active will help you feel less out of breath when you do everyday tasks.

The diagram below shows how doing more activity might help you feel better and less breathless.



Our Keep Active programme can help you get moving in your own time and at your own pace. Always talk to your healthcare professional before starting an exercise programme.



Read more about how to stay active at
AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/keep-active-programme

Try playing an instrument or singing

Singing or playing a musical instrument, like a harmonica, can help you to control your breathing. Improving your breathing control and muscle strength with music therapy can also help your mental wellbeing and quality of life. Read more about singing for lung health and playing a musical instrument at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/music](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/music)

“ I have a better outlook on life. I don't panic as I am able to control my breathing much better. ”

Singing for lung health support group member

Eating well when you're breathless

Sometimes eating might feel difficult when you're breathless. If this is a problem, you could try having small meals more often, eating softer foods that are easy to chew, or having more nutritious liquids like fruit juice, soups or meal shakes.

If you have problems swallowing your food, your GP may refer you to a speech and language therapist who can give you more support. It's important to make sure you're eating well to keep your lungs healthy. For more information, go to [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/eating-well](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/eating-well)

Sex and breathlessness

Just like other physical activity, sex can make you breathless. It can be helpful to talk openly with your partner about any difficulties you're having, so they can support you to manage your symptoms during sex.

You could try different positions or take regular breaks. Read more about how to manage your breathlessness during sex at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/sex](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/sex)

More support

Work and benefits support

If your breathlessness means you cannot work, you may be able to claim financial support and benefits such as Personal Independence Payment, Universal Credit or Housing Benefit.

Depending on your circumstances, you may also be able to get help with everyday costs like prescriptions and food. Our helpline team can help you to find out more about what benefits you may be eligible for. For more information, go to [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/benefits](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/benefits)

Join a support group

Getting out of breath can be frightening. The good news is that you can get help and support. You can join one of our free online support groups:



Motivational Mondays singing for lung health sessions. The sessions include relaxation, breathing exercises and singing.



Harmonica for lung health is a chance to learn how to play folk, country and blues music with a harmonica. You'll also learn new breathing techniques to help strengthen your breathing muscles.



Our Breathe Easy Programme is a friendly community, which gives you practical advice to manage your lung health.

You can sign up to our online support groups at [AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/groups-support](https://www.AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/groups-support)



At Asthma + Lung UK we bring care and support for people with lung conditions now. With advice through our expert helpline and online information, through to connecting people in communities with practical support and friendship. But we can't do it alone.

- ➔ **Help breathe new life into our ambitious goals.**
- ➔ **Donate, campaign, volunteer.**
- ➔ **We are Asthma + Lung UK.**

This is our battle for breath. Join our growing community:
AsthmaAndLung.org.uk/join-us

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Get advice, support and information at **AsthmaAndLung.org.uk**
or find us on social media:

