

Chest
Heart &
Stroke
Scotland



BREATHLESSNESS



ESSENTIAL GUIDE

This Essential Guide is about managing breathlessness.

It explains:

- What breathlessness is
- What you can do to help you to cope better with breathlessness
- Where to find additional advice and support

What is breathlessness?

Everyone feels short of breath sometimes, especially following exertion like running for a bus or climbing the stairs. This is normal, and it can actually be good for you.

However, you may experience more severe breathlessness due to a health condition and feel out of breath **as part of your daily life**.

This is the kind of breathlessness discussed in this booklet.

Living with breathlessness can be difficult. It can affect you physically and mentally. The good news is, there are many things you can do to help with your breathlessness and get the most out of life.

Breathlessness is also called "**dyspnoea**"
(disp-knee-ah)

What does breathlessness feel like?

If you feel breathless, you may notice that:

- Your chest feels tight
- It is harder to fill up your lungs
- You gasp for air
- You find it difficult to catch your breath or control your breathing
- You feel exhausted
- You feel anxious or panicky

Breathlessness can come on suddenly or slowly worsen over time. Everyone experiences breathlessness differently.

What causes breathlessness?

There are many conditions which can cause breathlessness. Some of these include:

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). This affects your airways, making it harder for air to move in and out of your lungs. It is often caused by smoking.

Heart failure. This can cause a build-up of fluid in your lungs, making it harder to breathe.

Asthma. This narrows the airways which carry air in and out of your lungs.

Anxiety. If you feel anxious, you may begin to breathe faster than usual. This tires out your chest muscles, and releases stress hormones which make you breathe even faster.

Long Covid can also cause breathlessness.

Managing your breathlessness

Ways to manage breathlessness include:



Treating the cause

You may be prescribed medication to help treat the underlying cause of your breathlessness.



Using breathing techniques

These can help you cope when you feel breathless, and manage your symptoms.



Living a healthy lifestyle

This can help to reduce your symptoms.

Find out more about many of these topics in our other free resources:

www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub



Call our Advice Line FREE on 0808 801 0899

Treating the cause

Depending on what causes your breathlessness, you may be prescribed medication to treat the underlying condition.



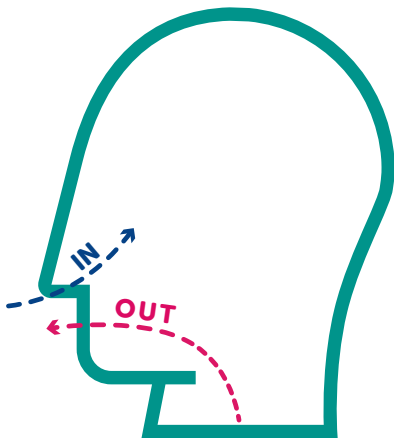
Medication may mean using an inhaler, spacer, or nebuliser. These help you to breathe medicine directly into your lungs. It is important to know how to use these in the right way to get the most benefit.

Ask your doctor, nurse, pharmacist or physiotherapist to check you are using your inhaler, spacer, or nebuliser in the right way. You can also find out more about inhalers and how to use them at **www.mylungsmylife.org**.

Breathing control techniques

These involve gentle breathing using your diaphragm (your main breathing muscle)

Ask your doctor or nurse about what techniques may be best for you. Practice them regularly and use them as much as possible.



Some examples of techniques include:

Relaxed, slow, deep breathing

Get into a comfortable position, relaxing your shoulders. Breathe in gently through your nose, then out through your mouth

Pursed-lips breathing

Breathe in through your nose, then out through your mouth with lips pursed as if whistling. This slows your breathing down.

Blow as you go

Breathe in first, before you do an activity that takes a lot of effort, and breathe out while you are doing the activity.

Paced breathing

Breathe in and out in time with the activity you are doing. For example, when walking up stairs, you could breathe in on one step and breathe out on the next step.

Breathing positions

If you feel breathless, different standing or sitting positions can help your breathing to recover.

What works best for you will depend on where you are and what you are doing.

Here are some positions that may help:



Sit down and lean forwards

Rest both arms on your thighs

Relax your hands and wrists



Sit upright with your back against the back of a chair

Rest both hands on your thighs

Relax your hands and wrists.



Stand up

Lean forwards with your arms resting on a ledge, for example: a windowsill, bench, handrail, or the back of a chair.



Stand up and lean your back against a wall.

Relax your shoulders. Rest your arms down by your sides.

If it feels comfortable, move your feet around 30cm away from the wall.

Keep your feet slightly apart

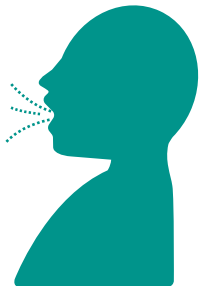
You can find out more about breathing positions and techniques at: **mylungsmylife.org/topics/group-1/how-to-clear-your-chest/airway-clearance-techniques**

Chest clearing exercises

Mucus (also called phlegm, sputum, or spittle) can build up in your lungs, making you feel more breathless.

It is important to try and get rid of this mucus to help you breathe more easily.

Your doctor may refer you to a respiratory (chest) physiotherapist. They will show you what exercises to do to help clear your lungs, and tell you how often to do them.



Breathing at night

If your breathlessness is worse at night, these tips may help:

Use your breathing control techniques

If you have one, keep your inhaler, spacer, or nebuliser within easy reach

Keep a fan by your bed. Turn it on when you feel breathless

Try sleeping in an upright position, using pillows for support

If you wake up breathless, sit up and lean forwards. It can help to sit at the edge of the bed, feet on the ground, and lean your arms on a bedside table.

Keep a glass of water next to your bed

Use chest clearing techniques if needed

Pulmonary (lung) rehabilitation

Pulmonary rehabilitation (PR) is a free programme of exercise, education, and support run by healthcare professionals for people with lung problems.

PR can help you learn how to:

- Manage your condition
- Control your breathing
- Increase your fitness
- Improve your quality of life

There is strong evidence that PR can reduce breathlessness and make you feel better.

Your health professional will be able to tell you if PR is available, and refer you if it is. You can also discuss PR with your health professional if you have not been referred, but think it might help.

Know your triggers

For some people, things like smoke and pollen can make their breathlessness worse.



Learn what makes your breathlessness worse (your triggers) and try to avoid them.



Text WEATHER to 66777 to receive a free “Air Quality and Weather” text message from Chest Heart & Stroke Scotland. This text will tell you about outdoor conditions in your area that may affect your breathing.



Keep up to date with your vaccinations

Being vaccinated lowers your risk of catching chest infections, and helps to reduce how serious they are if you do get them.

Healthy lifestyle changes

Stop smoking

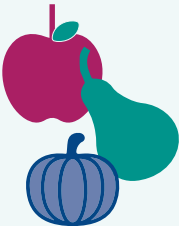
Smoking damages your lungs, causes mucus to build up, and narrows your airways, making it harder for you to breathe.

Stopping smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your health and to help with your breathing.



There is lots of free support available to help you stop smoking. Ask your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist for information, or call **Quit Your Way Scotland** on **0800 848 484**

Manage your weight, eat well, and drink sensibly



Managing your weight, eating a healthy balanced diet, and limiting alcohol intake are important for your general health and to avoid or fight off chest infections.



Extra weight around your lungs and chest, or being underweight, can affect how your lungs work.

Drinking heavily (over 14 units/week) reduces your immunity and makes it more likely that you will catch a chest infection. If you need help reducing alcohol intake, you can find information at **www.drinkaware.co.uk** or call Drinkline on **0300 123 1110**

Keep active

Regular physical activity can help with your breathlessness, increase your energy levels, and improve your overall health.

Avoiding activity can make breathlessness worse. The more activity you do, the more you will be able to do before breathlessness kicks in.

Your health professional can help you to decide what activities would be good for you, depending on your overall health and level of breathlessness.



If activities like dressing, washing, or cooking make you breathless, speak to your doctor about a referral to occupational therapy. Your occupational therapist may then be able to arrange equipment or aids to help, or give you tools to manage your breathlessness.

Tips for getting active:

- Remember to use your breathing control techniques
- Pick activity you enjoy doing
- Set small, realistic goals. Remember, even housework or walking to the shops counts as exercise!
- Pace yourself and don't overdo it
- If exercise causes pain or discomfort, stop doing that activity. It's okay to dial things back.
- Try to get into a routine



If you have recently had a flare-up in your symptoms (also called an exacerbation), speak to your doctor, nurse, or physiotherapist before restarting any exercise or activity.

Managing anxiety

Some people feel anxious, frightened, or panicky if their breathing feels out of control.

This is made more complicated by the fact that the symptoms of breathlessness are very similar to the symptoms of anxiety.

Recognising when and why you feel anxious can be a key step in feeling more in control.

Doing breathing exercises, listening to relaxing music, or using mindfulness techniques can help.

If your breathlessness makes you feel anxious or affects your mood, it is important to speak to your doctor or other health professional about how you are feeling.



Help from family and friends

Your family and friends can help you manage your breathlessness by:

Keeping you calm and reassuring you

Helping you get into a comfortable breathing position

Getting you your inhaler, spacer, or nebuliser if you have one

Opening a window for fresh air or bringing you a fan if this helps

Doing your breathing exercises with you

Joining you when you do any exercise or physical activity



Know when to get medical help

Breathlessness is different for everyone. People may experience different symptoms on different days or at different times.

It is important to know what “normal” looks like for you. This will help you to recognise when you are more breathless than usual.

If you feel more breathless than usual, it is important to tell your doctor.



Ask your doctor for an urgent appointment or home visit if you experience any of the following:

- You feel unwell or feverish
- You are coughing more than usual
- You have more mucus than usual
- The colour of your mucus has changed

You may need to start antibiotics if you have a chest infection. It is important that you do this as soon as possible.



If you need to go to hospital, remember to take all your medications and inhalers with you.

Our publications are free to everyone in Scotland, in PDF and in print. See them all at www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

For free, confidential advice and support from our Advice Line Team, contact:

0808 801 0899 (Mon-Fri 9am-4pm)

text ADVICE to 66777

advice@chss.org.uk

One in five people in Scotland are affected by chest, heart and stroke conditions or Long Covid. Go to www.chss.org.uk/supportus to find out how you can help us support more people in Scotland.

To give feedback or request alternative formats, email: health.information@chss.org.uk

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**Scan here to see
all our resources!**

Updated: Apr 2023
Next review: Apr 2026
E10-v.1.0-Apr2025

Scottish Charity (no SC018761)