

Managing breathlessness 3: Breathing techniques

The information given below is designed to help you manage your stable long-term breathlessness. If you feel your breathing is getting worse or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, it is important to seek medical advice.

Muscles involved in breathing

The diaphragm

The main muscle of breathing is the diaphragm. This is a large flat sheet of muscle covering the base of your rib cage. As you breathe in, it moves down to help draw the air into your lungs, and your tummy rises. When you breathe out it relaxes, returning to its natural dome shape and allowing your tummy to rest back in. The diaphragm muscle does not tire easily.

Breathing accessory muscles

There are many muscles around your neck, upper chest and shoulders with the role of moving your neck and arms. However, when you are breathless, these muscles can pull on your ribs to help with breathing. These muscles are therefore called 'breathing accessory muscles'.

It is normal to use these muscles for short periods of time when very breathless, however they are not designed to help with breathing for long periods. They require extra energy and effort to use, and fatigue far quicker than the diaphragm. When used unnecessarily, these muscles can unhelpfully focus the breathing to the upper chest, making the breathing pattern inefficient. With prolonged overuse they may become tight, stiff and sore.

While it is normal to use your breathing accessory muscles when breathless, it is also important to relax and 'switch them off' once the breathlessness has passed. Try to focus your breathing movement on your tummy (diaphragm) as much as possible and keep your breathing accessory muscles 'in reserve'.

Breathing techniques

Relaxed tummy breathing

When to use

Relaxed tummy breathing may help you recover quicker from breathlessness after activity. It may also help your breathing to settle if you feel panicky. You may wish use this breathing method with a handheld fan and in a position that eases breathlessness (see leaflets 'Managing breathlessness 2: Handheld fan' and 'Managing breathlessness 4: Positions to ease breathlessness').

How it works

Relaxed tummy breathing is sometimes known as 'breathing control'. The aim is to move from fast, panicky, upper chest breathing to relaxed, slow, tummy breathing. This breathing technique helps to make your breathing as efficient as possible by focusing on breathing from your diaphragm, with the upper chest relaxed.

The three Rs of relaxed tummy breathing

Rise the tummy as you breathe in

Relax the breath out

Rest and wait for the next breath to come

Breathing from the tummy often does not come naturally. You should therefore practise relaxed tummy breathing when you are not breathless for 10 minutes at a time, at least twice a day. This will help you master the technique.

Before practising make sure you are in a comfortable position, with your head and back supported, and your shoulders and upper chest relaxed. Place one hand on your tummy. Feel the tummy rise and expand as you breathe in and relax down as you breathe out. Breathe gently when practising; there should only be a slight movement of your tummy at rest.

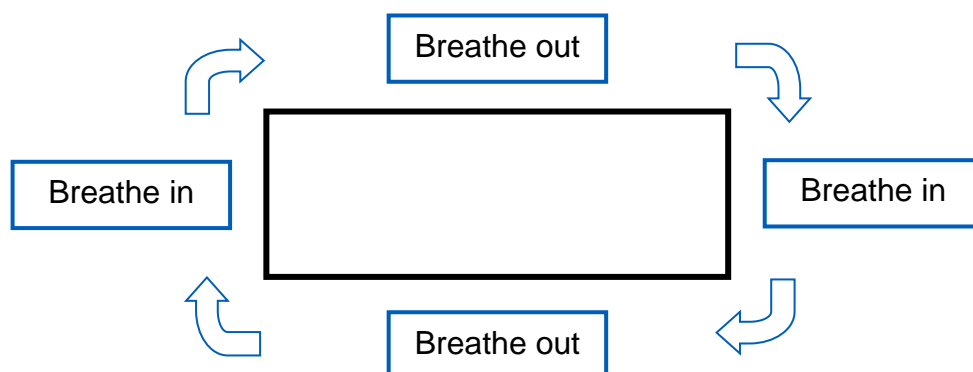
“Breathe low and slow, relax, let go”

If you have a tendency to breathe with small, fast breaths from the top of your chest, you may find taking slower, deeper breaths from your tummy helps to ease breathlessness.

Breathe a rectangle

When practising relaxed tummy breathing some people like to imagine a rectangle. Wherever you are, there is often a rectangle to be seen, whether this is a book, TV, computer or tablet screen, a door, window, table top or even a picture on the wall.

Follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you tummy breathe. Gradually slow the speed at which your eyes move around the edge of the rectangle to slow your breathing.



Recovery breathing

When to use

Use Recovery breathing when you feel extremely breathless or panicky and you are unable to use relaxed tummy breathing.

How it works

Recovery breathing allows more time for the air to leave your lungs as you breathe out, therefore creating more room for the next breath in. The aim of recovery breathing is to calm your breathing until you can breathe smoothly and quietly from your tummy again. For further information on positions to help manage breathlessness see 'Managing breathlessness 4: Positions to ease breathlessness'.

The three Fs of recovery breathing

Fan

Forward lean position

Focus on long or relaxed breaths out

People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or asthma may prefer **long** breaths out, perhaps through pursed lips. People with other conditions may find **relaxed** breaths out suit them better.

Pursed lips breathing

Some people find breathing in through the nose and out through narrowed lips helps to ease their breathlessness. This technique tends to help people who have conditions such as COPD or emphysema. People who find this technique beneficial often use it instinctively without realising they are doing it.

Pursed lips breathing helps to keep the airways open, thereby allowing the air to leave the lungs more easily. This creates more room for the next breath in. You can use pursed lips breathing at the same time as relaxed tummy breathing or recovery breathing.

General advice

- Avoid breath-holding during activities e.g. climbing stairs or bending.
- Try to 'blow as you go' - this means breathing out on effort, e.g. when bending, lifting, reaching or standing up from a chair.
- Try to avoid rushing.
- Try matching the rhythm of your breathing to your steps, e.g. take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs.

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Useful sources of information

Contact us

Interstitial Lung Disease Service

t: 020 7188 8635 (Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm)

e: gst-tr.khpildservice@nhs.net

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch.

t: 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 111

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

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t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

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