

Breathlessness

Breathlessness (Dyspnea), or shortness of breath are terms used to describe a person's awareness of difficulty in breathing and is experienced by 20-80% of palliative patients.

Like pain, it is a sensation that can be judged only by the person experiencing it and it is not necessarily linked with oxygen or carbon dioxide levels.

It is important that you report any breathlessness to your care team.

You may experience breathlessness only with physical activity, and be comfortable at rest. Or you may be aware of the effort of breathing even at rest and this may make everyday activities difficult:

- Eating and digesting food after eating;
- Dealing with discomfort such as constipation, pain or a fever;
- Even laughing.

Simply anticipating some event can cause difficulty breathing.

Breathlessness - Management / Self Care

Sometimes simple measures can relieve the sensation of shortness of breath, including:

- Providing a familiar voice to reduce anxiety
- Changing position
- Using relaxation techniques
- Improving air circulation by opening a window or turning on a fan

The following are activities that can help you to gain control over your sense of breathlessness:

1. Stop your activity.
2. Get supported in a relaxed position (see the relaxation positions described at the end of this section).
3. Concentrate on your breathing, gradually slowing the rate and deepening your breaths. In your mind say "slower breath, longer breath out" until you feel your breathing responding to your message.
4. If your breathlessness does not ease to a tolerable level with these strategies, call your physician and discuss adjusting your medication.

Relaxation Positions:

The following positions promote relaxation and efficient breathing with minimal effort.

- Lean the lower half of your back against a wall, with feet placed 12" away from the wall. Your shoulders should be relaxed, your arms hanging loosely by the sides.



- Stand and lean forward onto something of the required height. With the arms spread wide apart, rest your elbows and lower arms. The back should be straight.



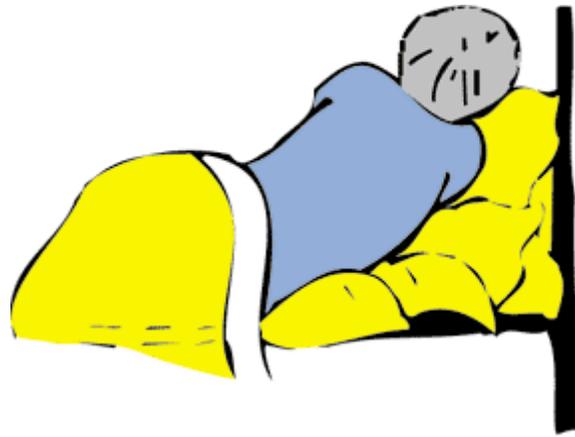
- Sit and lean slightly forward with *straight* back. Rest your forearms or hands on your thighs with wrists relaxed, feet on the floor.



- Sit leaning forward from the hips with a straight back, resting your head, shoulders and arms on the pillows on a table. Feet should be on the floor. When you are well relaxed, your arms should be lying loosely on the table while your shoulders and upper part of the chest rest against the pillows.



- If you are lying down make a slope with three or four pillows, with the whole of the side supported. Pillows between the boxspring and mattress help give a gradual slope to your bed.



Breathlessness can be a lonely, frightening and overwhelming experience. To cope with it, you will likely need to use several of the approaches described above. By working with your care team, your breathlessness can be eased and you can feel more comfortable