

COPING WITH BREATHLESSNESS

There are many causes of breathlessness in cancer patients. In some patients, it can be due to the underlying cancer that has spread to the lungs. In others, it might be due to lung infection, poor lung expansion due to prolonged inactivity, anaemia, blood clot in the lungs or other causes. If you have any of the following symptoms, please seek medical attention :

1. Fever
2. Worsening cough with increase in sputum, possibly blood-stained
3. Pale in appearance
4. Bleeding from the lower alimentary tract – passing black, tarry stools
5. Swelling of one leg

How do I cope with breathlessness?

You may try the following steps to cope with breathlessness. If they do not help to improve the condition, pharmacological management including oxygen therapy may be necessary:

1. One of the most important things to do when a person develops breathlessness is to slow down the activity. To establish whether you will develop breathlessness, try walking and talking at the same time. If you don't get breathless talking while

walking, then that is the right pace for you. If you do become breathless, you need to stop and slow down the activity or introduce breaks in activity.

2. In some people, sudden breathlessness will cause them to panic and develop anxiety. To prevent panic, one needs to be aware of his/her increasing breathlessness and stop the activity before one starts to feel uncontrolled. When a person feels uncontrolled, it can trigger anxiety and worsen the breathlessness.
3. For patients who are not mobilizing, you may use a Fowler's bed (hospital bed with mechanism for propping up the patient).

How to recover from breathlessness?

Breathlessness can be distressing and exhausting. It can cause you to struggle to talk. You may try the following to recover :

1. Stop the activity. Find a comfortable forward leaning position to rest.
2. Focus on breathing out and try to extend the length of the breath by breathing out slowly
3. Sometimes, using a small fan to direct a stream of air over your face may help

4. After you have recovered from your breath, stay still for a moment before you start moving again.

Breathing exercises

Breathless patients commonly use the neck and the shoulder muscles to help in breathing. Over time it will cause pain and stiffness of the neck and shoulders. Practicing controlled breathing will help you to use less energy and prevent the pain and stiffness.

1. Sit upright in chair with your back well supported and legs uncrossed. Place one hand on your tummy just above the belly button
2. With one hand on the tummy and the other resting on your thigh, relax your shoulders and upper chest.
3. Close your eyes and relax, feel the movement of your tummy as you breathe in and out. Feel your upper chest and shoulders relax as you breathe in and out. Do not try to take deep breaths.
4. Back massage, aromatherapy or other relaxation therapy may be helpful.

(Reference : St Christopher's Hospice London patient information leaflet, 2013)