

Breathlessness in lung cancer

Managing everyday activities



What we enjoy doing or need to do each day varies from person to person. What might be important to one person may not be to another - everyone is unique. If you are experiencing some degree of breathlessness, you may find that this is affecting aspects of your daily activities. This chapter hopes to offer some general advice and hints to help you overcome some of these difficulties. Try to remember the following three Ps:

- **PRIORITISE**
- **PLAN AHEAD**
- **PACE YOURSELF**

Prioritise

Spend some time considering what is important for you. Your priorities may vary from day to day. You may find that you can't pack as much into each day as you would like, so you may wish to conserve your energy for specific activities or events.

It may be helpful to leave some tasks, particularly heavier ones, to friends or family. This will give you more energy for the things that are more important to you.

Try to cut out unnecessary jobs, for example, let someone else take care of the laundry if it allows you to go on a short stroll with the dog.

Plan ahead

Forward planning can help you to achieve what you want to do, without becoming over tired or breathless. You may find that certain times of the day are better for you to do more active things and at other times it's better to have a rest or a quiet period. It may be helpful to organise outings or activities in advance,

to make sure that you don't take on too much in any one day.

Think ahead to enable you to gain the most out of what you want to do. For example, give yourself extra time when going to an appointment or choose a restaurant that has convenient parking. This should help you to feel more relaxed and enjoy the activities that you undertake.

As well as thinking ahead during your day, it may also be a good idea to think about organising each activity as effectively as possible. This will help you to avoid using your energy needlessly.

Pace yourself

Try to pace yourself during the day by balancing periods of activity with periods of rest. You may also find that you wish to have a rest during an activity to avoid becoming breathless.

Don't be afraid to get help with some activities if it lets you enjoy things that are more satisfying for you or your family.

Remember - take a "breather" whenever you feel the need!

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An occupational therapist can provide further information about managing everyday activities.

Helpful hints

Beginning the day

When rising, take your time getting out of bed. Sit on the edge of the bed for a few minutes. Perhaps you don't need to get dressed immediately - you may feel better having a cup of tea first.

When washing and dressing, give yourself as much time as you need. It may be easier to sit down for these activities and it is best to avoid bending as much as possible. You may wish to consider other methods of putting on your socks or shoes. Try a long handled shoehorn or perhaps a member of the family can help. Loose clothing is also often easier to put on and less restrictive on your breathing.

Bathing/Showering

You may find that having a bath or a shower uses up a lot of your energy. The following tips may help:

- Avoid having the water too hot and making the room too steamy.
- Sit down while showering, especially if you are prone to getting very tired or dizzy.
- Have a small grab-rail in the shower, that you can put your hand onto if you require.

- Try to have somewhere to sit down after you come out, while drying yourself, or wrap yourself in an absorbent towelling bathrobe.

There is a whole range of bathing and showering equipment available to help (see your occupational therapist for advice).

Managing tasks around the home

Try to organise your house so that items you use frequently are kept within easy reach. Rearrange things to allow you to avoid excessive bending and stretching. Remember that it may be easier to sit on a stool when bending down to reach low plugs and switches or, for example, emptying your washing machine. You may wish to consider using a pick-up stick or reacher –useful for picking up the letters from behind the front door. Ask your occupational therapist for advice on where you can get equipment.

Another tip in order to avoid bending down, is to place shopping/washing baskets on a stool or table at waist level, when organising or emptying them.

Use your work surfaces or table to help you move your utensils or cup of tea around the kitchen - a kitchen trolley can be very useful to carry heavier objects from room to room. Use a flask and a shoulder bag if a trolley is not available or suitable. This can help to carry drinks around and keep both hands free.

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Sit down to do as much as possible, for example, peeling potatoes, drying dishes or waiting for food to cook. Your occupational therapist may be able to arrange for you to be supplied with a perching stool, which is ideal for working at work top height.

If you can, try to avoid climbing the stairs too many times during the day. Bring down everything you may need for the day when coming down in the morning.

Try to ensure that your bed or chairs are easy to get on/off. If chairs or the toilet are too low, you will waste a lot of energy struggling to get up. Try to sit on a suitable height of chair. A low toilet can easily be sorted by using a slightly raised toilet seat or perhaps a small grab-rail, strategically placed, on the wall.

Social activities/Getting out and about

Remember to think ahead when you are planning an evening or a day out. If you are going somewhere unfamiliar, try to get information in advance, for example, make sure that lifts and parking/transport facilities are nearby. Check if your local shopping centre and supermarket have wheelchairs available to borrow, if required.

You may find that in certain atmospheres your mouth becomes dry or that you cough more. It can be helpful to have a small bottle of water or some sweets handy.

If you have to carry heavy shopping, try to distribute the weight comfortably by using a shopping trolley or rucksack.

If you are having difficulty breathing whilst performing day-to-day activities, such as walking, bathing or dressing, then you may well qualify for some financial benefit from the Government. You may also be entitled to a disabled badge for parking the car or travelling expenses. Ask your lung cancer support nurse or social worker for advice on benefits entitlement.

Remember - using the three Ps:

prioritise, plan and pace, may help you continue to get out and about, enjoy socialising with friends and family and be involved in the things that you want to do.

Diet

You may lose weight because of the lung cancer, its associated treatments, or simply because you are too breathless/tired to cook or even to chew food.

Try eating small, frequent meals rather than three large meals a day, and remember to choose food that you particularly enjoy. If possible, get someone to prepare your food for the day and keep easy to eat foods within your reach. Eating with other people usually encourages you to eat better. Rather than eat alone, ask a neighbour or friend to join you.

Advice from a dietician may be useful as there are food supplements and

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techniques that are helpful when the appetite or energy levels are low.

Oxygen use

Not all breathlessness is associated with a lack of oxygen. Although oxygen is sometimes a beneficial treatment for breathlessness, it doesn't always help and there can be a risk of becoming dependent. It is a prescribed treatment option and medical staff should assess you properly before starting it.

It may be that a well ventilated room, using open windows or using an electric fan, will achieve the same effect as oxygen.

Wheelchair use

A wheelchair may be helpful to you at some point. However, an assessment should be made by an appropriate health professional before a wheelchair is used regularly (ask your GP for details). Short term loans may be available through your local Red Cross or hospital service.

Sexual intimacy

As with other activities, you may find that your breathlessness affects your sexual relationship. This in turn could lead to frustration between you and your partner at a time when you want to be really close. It might help to set aside time when you can discuss your most intimate feelings with your partner and look at ways that you may overcome any problems. You may find that certain sexual positions make you less breathless than others. If you have a reliever inhaler, it may be of help to use it before and after sexual relations.

It might help to discuss any problems with someone not so close, but who is able to answer your questions, such as your GP, hospital doctor or lung cancer support nurse. Please don't be embarrassed, as most doctors and lung cancer nurse specialists are used to dealing with this subject.



This organisation has been certified as a producer of reliable health and social care information.
www.theinformationstandard.org

This information has been taken from "Lung Cancer—A practical guide to breathlessness" booklet.

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Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation is the only charity in the UK wholly dedicated to the defeat of lung cancer.

It funds research into prevention and early diagnosis, provides practical and emotional support as well as helping people to quit smoking.

A variety of patient-focused lung cancer information materials are available free of charge to people affected by lung cancer. For further information and details of your local support services please call The Roy Castle Lung Cancer Helpline on:

0333 323 7200