

# Getting the air you need:

A practical guide to coping with and  
managing shortness of breath



"Riding the Dragon" A Cancer Journey | by Conrad Furey

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When you are short of breath, it is hard to do your regular activities such as getting dressed, cooking a meal, and doing the things that you enjoy.

When you are short of breath, you may:

1. Tighten up your chest muscles to breathe.
2. Breathe faster.
3. Have feelings of fear, anxiety, panic or general unrest.

As someone living with shortness of breath, you may find that you are more tired, worried and anxious. You may be upset about your condition and may wonder if anyone else feels like this.

They do!

This book has information to help you learn about:



- ✓ what you can do to get the most out of your breathing
- ✓ what to do when you are short of breath
- ✓ ways to cope if you are feeling down or anxious

Let us know what works and does not work in making breathing and coping easier. We are here to help you, please talk with us about your concerns.

*Your health care team*

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## When should I call my health care team?



- ✓ When your breathing has become more difficult over a short period of time.
- ✓ Along with breathing problems, you feel dizzy, you notice an increase in your heart rate or your skin is very pale. One of your blood counts may be low and you may need a blood test.
- ✓ You are struggling to breathe and feel very nervous.
- ✓ You have sudden, new or increasing chest pain.
- ✓ You have a fever 38°C or higher.
- ✓ When you wake up you are suddenly short of breath.
- ✓ You have a new or increasing cough.
- ✓ Your breathing is noisy.

## Will oxygen help me?

Oxygen through a mask or nasal prongs may help when the oxygen level in your blood is too low.



The oxygen level in your blood can be measured easily by placing a sensor over one of your fingers. This can be done when visiting your health care provider.

If your oxygen level is good, then extra oxygen from a tank may not help you breathe easier.

To help you breathe easier:

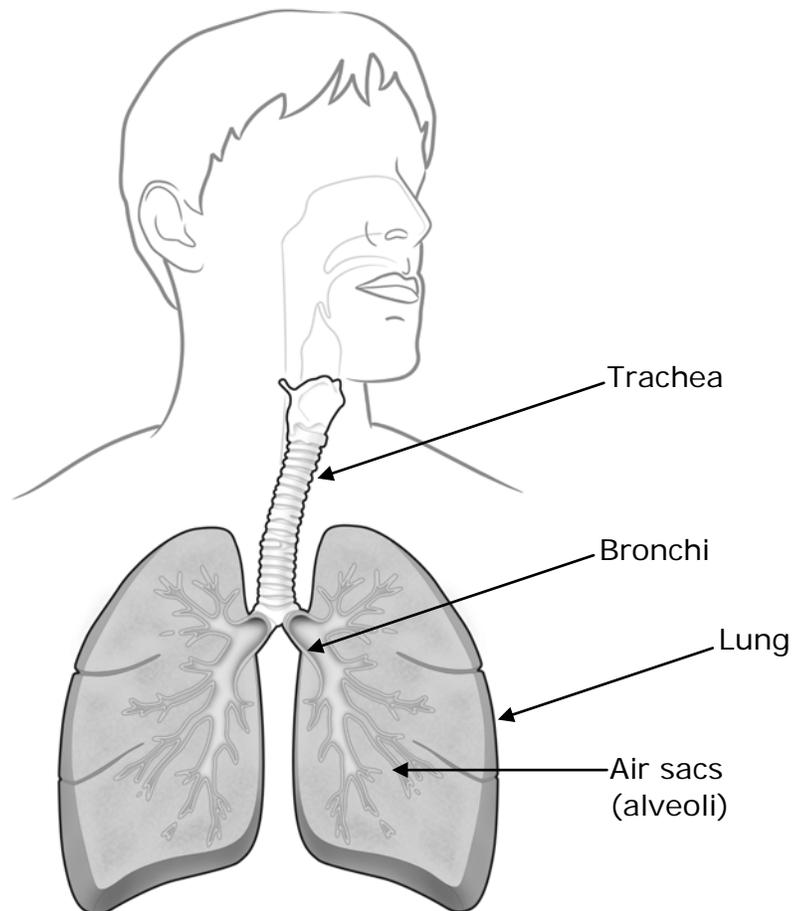


- ✓ use a fan blowing gently on your face when you are short of breath. It can go a long way to relieve your sense of breathlessness
- ✓ use the positions and breathing ways described in this book to help you manage every day activities.

## How do the lungs work?

Lungs carry the air that you breathe in and out. Oxygen is in the air you breathe in. You have two lungs located in your chest, one on each side.

When you breathe in, the air flows in through your mouth or nose and down a series of tubes starting with the trachea (windpipe). The trachea branches into two smaller tubes called the bronchi. This branching to smaller tubes continues until the air reaches tiny air sacs called the alveoli. There are millions of these in each of your lungs. It is here that the air releases oxygen to the blood which is taken throughout your body.



## What is abdominal breathing?

Breathing to get the most out of your lungs is called lower chest or abdominal (belly) breathing. From now on, we will call it abdominal breathing.

Doing this type of breathing will help you with what you do each day. Practice this breathing until your body gets used to it. You will be using this type of breathing with the exercises and activities that are described in the book.

### Abdominal breathing – The key to abdominal breathing is to find and use your diaphragm to breathe

#### Step 1

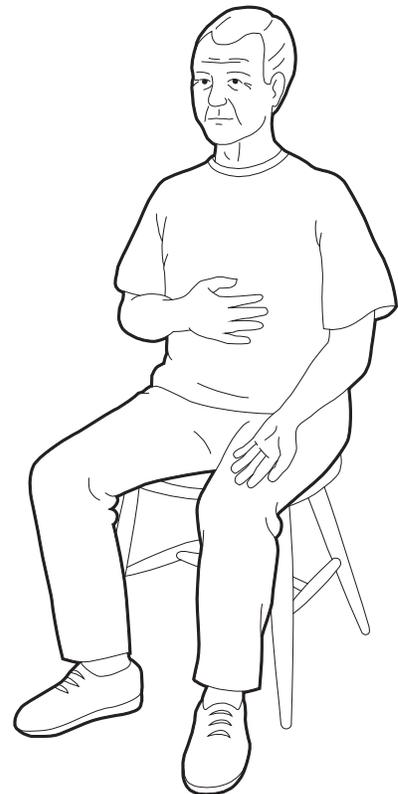
Get comfortable. Sit with your back supported.  
Relax your shoulders and upper chest.

Place your palms facing up on your legs.  
If you are standing, turn your palms outward.

#### Step 2

Place your hand on your abdomen just above your belly button and below your ribs, and give a little cough. **The muscle you feel under your hand is the diaphragm.**

Take a breath in and push out your hand.  
This will give you a feeling of breathing around your waist.



Now that you know how to breathe using your diaphragm, practice the breathing exercise described below, 2 to 4 times during the day.

This breathing exercise increases the space for your lungs to expand so that more oxygen can reach deep down into your air sacs.

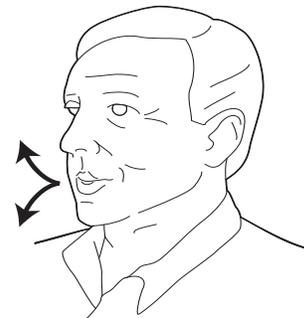
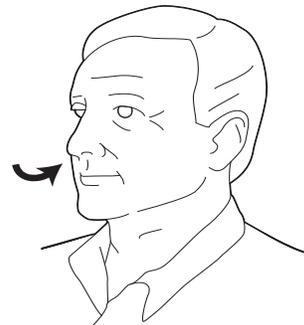
### **Step 1: Get ready**

If sitting, place palms facing up on lap.

If standing, turn your palms outward.

### **Step 2: Breathe**

1. Breathe in through your nose as you push out your diaphragm and count 1, 2, 3, 4
2. Hold your breath and count 5, 6, 7
3. Breathe out slowly through your pursed lips as you count 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
4. Repeat 4 times.



A demonstration of abdominal breathing and the above breathing exercise is found on: <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the video "Managing Shortness of Breath".

## Getting the air you need

When you are short of breath, your body needs to find ways to get the air you need. What you may notice, when you are short of breath:

- You use your shoulder and upper chest muscles to breathe
- You breathe faster
- You have feelings of fear, anxiety, panic or general unrest

### **You use your shoulder and upper chest muscles to breathe**

We usually use our diaphragm and lower chest muscles to breathe. In heavy exercise, the muscles of the upper chest and shoulders also help in breathing. These muscles were not meant to work for long periods of time and get tired easily.

Overworked muscles:

- ✓ become tense
- ✓ use up more oxygen
- ✓ do not work as well as relaxed muscles

Using the shoulder and upper chest muscles too much causes an increased need for oxygen. This adds to breathing problems.

### **You breathe faster**

When you feel short of breath you breathe faster. It takes more effort to bring air in quickly. For example, think of blowing into a balloon. If you tried to fill the balloon quickly, it would take more energy than if you blew gently. The same is true for filling your lungs.

Also, breathing quickly usually leads to shallow breathing. With shallow breathing air does not get into the air sacs. If you think back to how the lungs work, oxygen is not available to the body to use until it reaches the air sacs. If the air only flows through the tubes and not to the air sacs, the body cannot use the air that is brought in.

Therefore, breathing faster takes more energy and often does not move the air deep enough to make the most of each breath.

### **You have feelings of fear, anxiety, panic or general unrest**

All of these feelings are common responses to feeling short of breath. These feelings increase how fast you breathe and cause your muscles to tense.

Fast breathing and tense muscles use more oxygen and add to your feeling short of breath.



To decrease shortness of breath you need to slow down your breathing. The next few pages describe what you can do to slow down your breathing to get the air you need.

## How do I slow down my breathing?

When you slow down your breathing, you:

- ✓ relax your shoulder and upper chest muscles
- ✓ gain a sense of control
- ✓ breathe more gently

Having a fan blowing gently on your face will also help to slow down your breathing.



### First - Get in a comfortable position

When you become short of breath, get into a comfortable position. Find a position so that you can expand your chest as much as possible. Here are some suggestions of good positions. You may find that other positions work well. Do what helps you.

**While sitting in a chair or on the edge of a bed** lean slightly forward. Support your arms in your lap, with a pillow, or an arm rest. Do not let your arms dangle by your side.

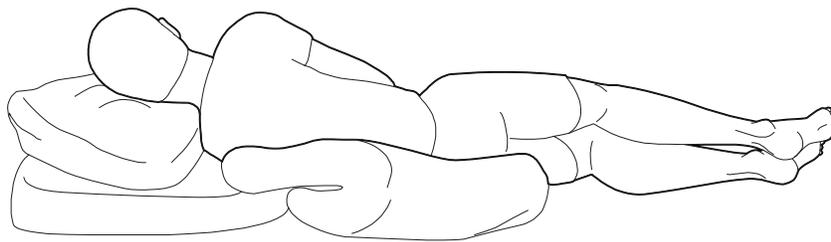


These positions support your shoulders and upper chest to relax and allow your diaphragm and abdomen and chest to expand.



While in bed:

- ✓ raise your head or the head of the bed using pillows to a height that is most comfortable.
- ✓ lie on your affected side (the side your cancer is on) to expand your chest and good lung as much as possible. Make sure that pillows are supporting the small of your back.



**When you are in a comfortable position, then gain control of your breathing and relax your shoulder and upper chest muscles**

1. Immediately tilt your chin down towards your chest and breathe out through lips in short bursts 10 times.
2. Continue to do this until you begin to feel your neck muscles relax and then breathe in through your nose and out through pursed lips 3 times.
3. Next breathe in through your nose and out through an open mouth making an “AH” sound.
4. Repeat until relaxed. Once your breathing has slowed then **return to abdominal breathing until settled.**

A demonstration of this technique is found on <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the video “Managing an Episode of Acute Shortness of Breath”.

**Practice**



Practice slowing your breath down when you are not especially short of breath.

Then, when you are short of breath and need to slow down your breathing you will know what to do.

Set aside time a few times during the day to practice. Repeating them 5 to 10 times a session is good, but do what works best for you.

## What can I do every day to help with shortness of breath?

### Planning activities

Planning your daily activities can help you have the time and the breathing capacity to do the activities that are important to you. Work at a pace that is right for you.

Plan activities so that you have enough time to do them and you have all you need at hand. Many people with shortness of breath say that feeling tired or having no energy is especially difficult.

Encourage family members to help with daily tasks such as housework. Sit down when doing chores such as ironing and preparing vegetables.



It is normal to need rest periods during the day and some days you will be more tired than others. Allow yourself as much rest as you need.

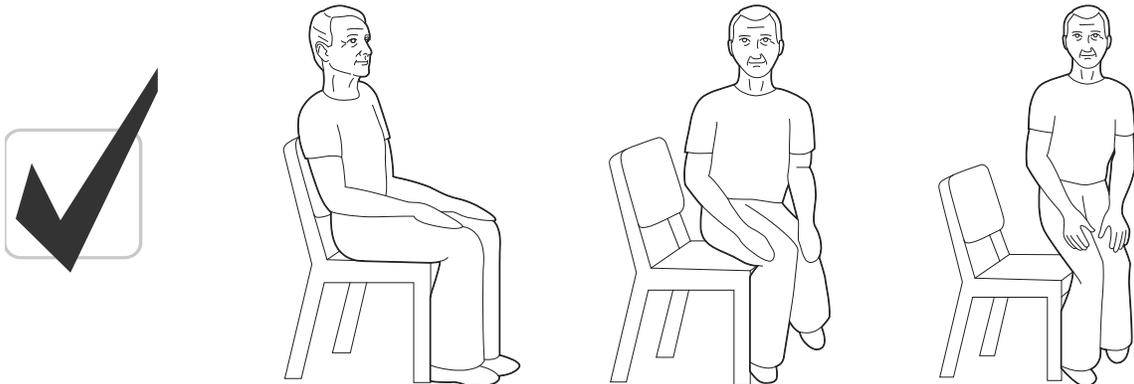
Use devices such as a:

- walker
- wheelchair
- bed rail
- hospital bed
- commode
- bath
- shopping cart
- baggage cart

Using devices helps cut down on the work your body needs to do to breath. Using these devices may help with any of the activities on the following pages.

## Sitting to standing

1. Move your hips forward to the front of the chair and place your feet shoulder width apart.
2. Place your hands on your legs (not on the arms of the chair).
3. Lean forward so your weight is over your legs and breathe in to a count of 4.
4. Push down on your legs as you use your hips and legs to lift up your body and breathe out at the same time.



A demonstration of sitting to standing is found on <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the video "Changing Positions: Sitting to Standing".

## Walking and managing gentle slopes and stairs

You may be anxious about stairs or walking up slopes especially if these have caused you shortness of breath in the past. You can increase your ability to do this without breathlessness if you use abdominal breathing while you walk, climb stairs or do any kind of activity.



To climb stairs:

- ✓ stand close to the stairs with one hand on the railing beside you
- ✓ breathe in as you lift your leg up
- ✓ breathe out as you place your leg on the step and raise yourself up

This means that you breathe in and out for every step you climb. Getting this right takes practice. Take your time to match your breathing with each step. Doing this will help you walk or climb stairs at a steady pace, without having to stop to catch your breath. It will also reduce the time you need to recover once you have reached the top of the stairs.

A demonstration of climbing stairs is found on <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the video “Shortness of Breath when Climbing Stairs”.

## Arranging things around the house

Put items you use most often within easy reach. Wall cupboards are easier to get to than low cupboards or high shelves.



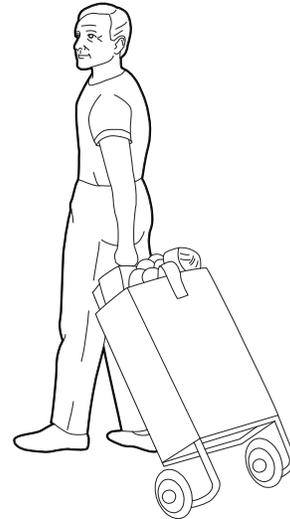
## Lifting heavy objects

You may find that lifting heavy items such as wet laundry or shopping bags can cause you to become tired or short of breath quickly. Do not carry heavy objects as this can cause shortness of breath.

Put wet laundry on a stool next to you.

Do not carry a bag or shopping bags with your arms by your side. The heavy bags pull your arms down and make you breathe harder.

Use a small back pack, a shopping bag on wheels, or try half filling shopping bags so that they do not become too heavy and awkward.



## Dressing

Sit for as much time as possible while dressing.

Use lower chest and abdominal breathing.

Try to wear loose fitting clothes especially around the waist and chest.

Avoid bending over to put on socks, tights and shoes.



## Bending

Bending over from the waist makes breathing very hard and can cause shortness of breath. Try to avoid bending over. Instead of bending over, ease yourself into a crouching position, keep your back straight and bend from the knees not the waist.

This allows you to keep your chest upright and your shoulders back – a position from which you can continue to breathe as comfortably as possible.

As you ease yourself into this position try to make sure that you have something secure to hold onto such as a table or chair. This will provide you with extra support and will also give you something to push against as you stand.



You may also find that having something to lean back against once you are in this position is helpful.

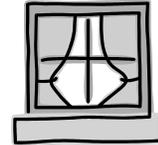
If you need to work at a level below your waist, emptying the washing machine or a cupboard, or gardening, use a low stool and sit, rather than bend.



## Showering or bathing

Many people find showering, bathing and dressing very tiring. Bathrooms can make you feel very claustrophobic and this will increase shortness of breath. Rest as often as you need.

Having a window slightly open in the bathroom while you bathe may help to reduce shortness of breath.



Here are some ideas that help to make bathing or taking a shower easier:

### Before you start

- Bath and shower chairs, or benches can also be used to reduce the stress of bathing. Talk with your health care team for more information.
- As you undress try not to hold your breath as you pull clothes over your head. Take your arms out of your dress or shirt first, then quickly slip it over your head. Breathe out as you slip it over your head. This means that your face is covered as little as possible and you do not have to raise your arms for long.
- Do not fill the bath too full and do not have the water too hot.
- Once undressed, sit at the side of the bath, breathe out as you slowly lift one leg in at a time instead of swinging both legs in together.
- If you feel you need to, do the abdominal breathing exercise before you lower yourself into the bath. You may find that sitting in the shower is less tiring.
- Position the shower so that water does not spray directly onto your face.

### **When you are done with your shower or bath**

- Let the water out of the bath before you get out. You may find it easier to lift yourself onto your knees first. Give yourself a few moments to rest before you stand.
- While you sit at the side of the bath wrap a large towel around yourself so that you begin to dry. You will find that this reduces the effort of patting yourself dry later. A terrycloth robe can do the drying for you instead.
- Sit down when you dry yourself. Bring your feet up to prevent bending over to dry your feet and legs.

### **Gardening**

Being short of breath can make gardening hard. You may find that you become short of breath when bending down a lot to plant or tend the garden. You may find it hard to get back up.

Use a low garden stool or chair to help you reach flowerbeds without bending too much and to give you a chance to rest in between activities. You can sit at a garden table to pot plants. Remember to use abdominal breathing so that you can do more.



## **Talking on the telephone**



Rushing to answer the telephone before someone hangs up or finding that you have to stand to talk can make your breathlessness more noticeable.

Try to make sure that your family, friends or work colleagues know that it can take you some time to answer the phone. Ask them to let the phone ring for a longer time so that you know you do not have to rush to it.

Try to make sure that you are sitting down comfortably before you pick up the phone and take a moment to 'catch your breath' before starting your conversation.

If you find you become short of breath while talking on the phone or in conversation, try to talk in short sentences. Pause after each sentence rather than talking quickly and for a long time before taking a breath.

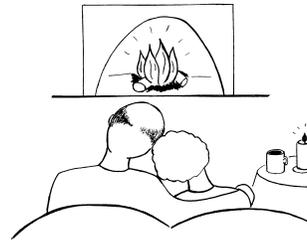
## **Intimacy and sexual activity**

You and your partner may have concerns about sex at a time when you both need physical and emotional tenderness. These concerns are perfectly normal and if you can both be open about them, it will be easier to figure out what to do.

Treatment such as chemotherapy and radiation can make you feel tired and can reduce your desire to have sex. Chemotherapy can also sometimes cause impotence (cannot get an erection). If you feel able, talk to your partner about any fears you have about sex, being short of breath or the cancer itself. This will help to reduce your concerns and anxieties and may help with some of the problems.

Sexual activity includes expressing affection and love by talking, hugging, touching, kissing as well as intercourse. Sexual intercourse needs energy and makes demands on your heart and lungs. Have intercourse when you feel rested and try to avoid times when you are stressed and tired.

This may mean changing the time of day when you have sex. Make yourself comfortable in a well-supported position to help you feel more relaxed and less rushed. Try to keep weight off your chest and avoid bending over.



Some positions may make you more short of breath than others. Take things slowly so you do not get short of breath. It may be hard to kiss for long periods of time. You may need to do more short, frequent kissing. You may find it easier to be in a sitting or a kneeling position. Avoid positions that may make you feel claustrophobic.

Heterosexual and same sex couples can try the following sexual positions:

- lying side by side, either facing towards each other or one behind the other
- in a sitting position
- the woman kneeling on the floor with her chest resting on the bed
- the woman sitting on the edge of the bed, feet on the floor, with the man kneeling on the floor in front

People naturally do get some shortness of breath during intercourse, if it is a problem, take a break and use abdominal breathing to slow your breathing down.

Changes in your sex life are a part of growing older so slower erections and delayed orgasms are normal in middle and later life.

### **Pacing yourself**

It is important to pace yourself and to rest between jobs. Letting others do some daily chores from time to time can allow you to do things that you enjoy. Planning and pacing your activities may help you feel able to go out and see friends and family. Walk more slowly. Try not to walk and talk.



It may be that you first need to find out by trial and error what you can comfortably do. You may even feel that being short of breath for a short period is okay if you are able to do what you want to do.

## What kind of exercise should I do?

Gentle exercise need not make you breathless, especially if you take it slowly and use abdominal breathing as much as possible. By gradually increasing the exercise you do, you can help to improve your breathing and feel better. Even if you have severe lung problems, a small amount of exercise can help.

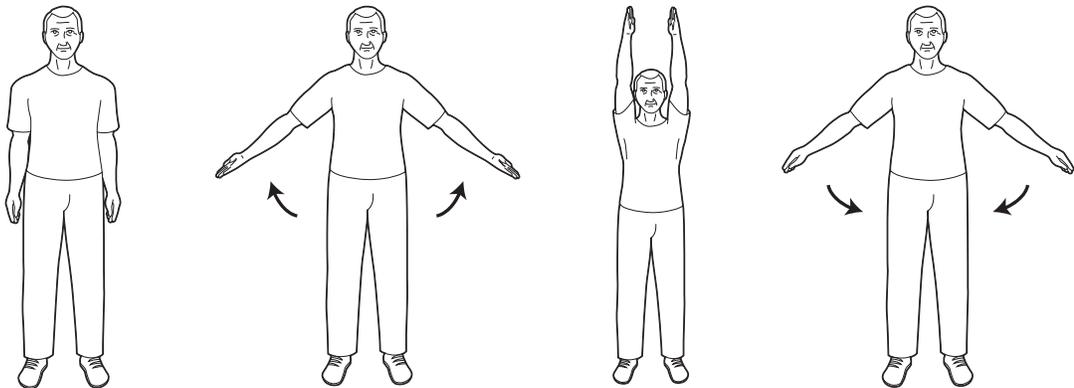
Talk with your doctor or physiotherapist about more intensive or endurance exercise programs. If your shortness of breath is not extreme or if you have been able to increase your amount of exercise over time, you may want to try something like swimming or a water exercise class.

These next sets of exercises are about strengthening the muscles that help you breathe. Try and do these everyday.

A demonstration of all of these exercises is found on <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the video "Respiratory Muscle Exercises".

### Daily respiratory muscle exercises

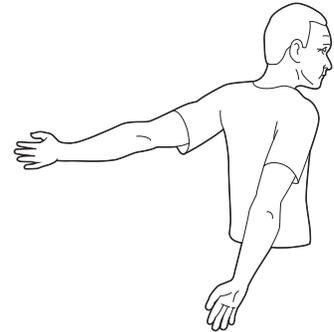
#### 1. Stretching the muscles of the chest wall:



1. Breathe in through your nose, as you breathe in, raise your arms straight overhead.
2. Turn palms out and extend your arms out and down the sides of your body. Breathe out using pursed lips.
3. Repeat 10 times.

## 2. Opening the chest

1. Place your arms straight out in front of your body, palms facing each other.
2. Breathe in through your nose as you move your straight arms out to the sides and push arms back as far as you can.
3. As you breathe out through your lips move your arms back to front of the body.
4. Repeat 10 times.



## 3. Sniffles to work the diaphragm

1. Close your mouth.
2. Breathe in and out of your nose quickly.
3. Work towards doing this for 60 seconds, but you may need to start at 15 seconds only and increase this time with practice.
4. Stop the exercise if you feel dizzy.



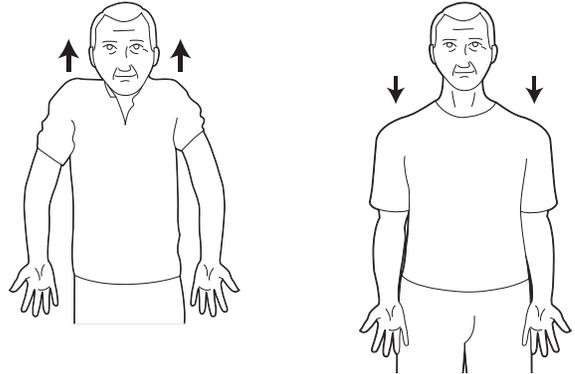
## 4. Elbow circles

1. Place hands on shoulders.
2. Make a circle with the elbows.
3. Breathe IN as the elbows go up.
4. Breathe OUT as the elbows return.
5. Make circles forward 10 times.
6. Make circles backward 10 times.



## 5. Shoulder shrug

1. Place arms along side of your body with palms forward and fingers spread apart.
2. Breathe in as you rotate shoulders up and back.
3. Breathe out as you push your shoulders down.
4. Repeat 10 times.



## 6. Chest fly (Chicken Wings)

1. Sit with feet shoulder width apart, hands on ears, palms facing forwards.
2. Breathe out as you slowly bring arms/elbows toward each other.
3. Inhale as you bring your arms back out.
4. Repeat 20 times.



## 7. Stir the pot

1. Sitting up straight, place your hands in prayer position.
2. Make large circles like you are stirring soup in a pot.
3. Breath in as you circle away from your body. Breath out as you circle towards your body.
4. Repeat 10 times.
5. Rest.
6. Repeat 10 times in the other direction.



## **I feel down and anxious. Is this normal?**

### **Feeling down**

Many people feel down at various times during their illness. One day you may feel well and relaxed. Other days you may feel frightened, bitter, angry, sad and even guilty. Sometimes you have all of the feelings together. These are all normal feelings.

These feelings may be due to: shortness of breath, the cancer, the treatment and to any fears you have about the future. There is no right or wrong way to deal with them, but understanding that they are normal will help.

Sometimes you may feel that you need to be alone and at other times that you really want to be with people. Go with what feels right for you at the time. You may have family and friends who find your changing emotions hard to understand. If you talk about how you feel and let them talk about how they feel, you will be able to cope with the problems more easily.

## Feeling anxious

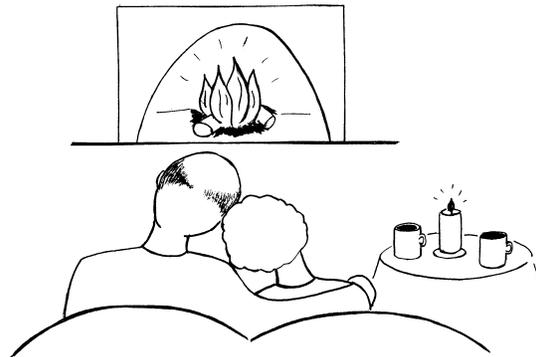
Most people have periods of feeling anxious. Sometimes we are not aware of it and instead feel cross or irritable. Take a moment to think about what is really upsetting you, as this may help you deal with it.

Anxiety can cause tension and pain, sweating, stomach problems, constipation and diarrhea. Anxiety may also cause you to breathe too fast and shallow. You may feel as if you are having a panic attack and fear you may suffocate. It is extremely unlikely you will suffocate. This is the time to slow down your breathing and use abdominal breathing as described on page 3.

You may find it helpful to open a window, have a fan blow air on your face or go outside in the fresh air to help slow your breathing.



Listening to music or focusing on a favorite picture may help you to relax, decrease your anxiety and slow your breathing.



## Feeling depressed

You may be depressed because of your illness and being short of breath. Everyone can feel down or anxious at times but sometimes these feelings do not seem to pass and can become worse.

Depression can come on gradually. It can slowly sneak up on you. You may not think that you are depressed.

Here are some signs and symptoms which may help you see if you are becoming depressed. You may experience some of them from time to time without actually being depressed, but if they persist and last for more than 2 weeks, talk to your nurse or doctor.

Signs and symptoms of depression:

- feelings of sadness or feeling down most of the time
- less interested and less able to enjoy the things that once gave you pleasure
- feel tired or without energy most of the time
- have trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- finding it hard to concentrate or make decisions
- increase or decrease in appetite or weight
- feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- feeling like you just cannot go on, or thinking about suicide



These feelings are common in depression and can be hard to admit. It is much better to talk about them as they are a certain sign of needing support.

Depression is an illness and it will not just 'go away' on its own. Do not feel embarrassed or ashamed to ask for help. Skilled advice and care can really help.

## What are some ways to help me relax?

Learning ways to help you relax can reduce muscle tension and anxiety, which will help with shortness of breath.

Go to <http://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB> - Select the videos “Progressive Muscle Relaxation” and “Guided Imagery”.

### First ...

- Find yourself a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.
- Make yourself comfortable, either in a chair or propped up in bed and breathe gently.
- You may choose to play music or sit in silence.
- Focus on something like a flower or a picture, consider using visualization such as an open space or simply close your eyes.
- Be aware of your breathing just for a moment, checking that you are using lower chest or abdominal breathing.
- Aim to maintain this steady gentle breathing throughout the relaxation period.



### Then ...

The next few steps are part of a process called progressive muscle relaxation. This involves tensing and then relaxing separate muscle groups throughout the body one after another. The steps aim to help you relax your shoulders and chest but they can be applied to any muscle group.

## **Progressive muscle relaxation**

1. Once you are in a comfortable supported position, slowly draw your shoulders up to your ears. Hold them there for as long as it is comfortable for you. If this is uncomfortable, try drawing up one shoulder at a time.
2. After you feel tension in your shoulders, gently lower them and feel them relax. Be aware of a release in tension as you do this.

If you work gently through all the muscles, starting with your toes and working up to your head, you will experience a sensation of warmth or heaviness as you relax.

You may feel that you are floating or spinning. If this is unpleasant then stop and open your eyes, slow your breathing and then continue.

You may want to set aside 20 to 30 minutes during the day to enjoy a full relaxation of all the muscle groups. Or, find that repeating some form of relaxation for 5 to 10 minutes, 2 or 3 times a day, helps prevent tension from building up.

**We are here to help ...**

**There is a lot to learn about getting the air you need. Practice helps, and it takes time to figure out what works for you. Please let us know your concerns.**





**Front Mural: “*Riding the Dragon*”  
by Conrad Furey**

*Riding the Dragon* is a 30 foot mural created in 2006 by renowned Hamilton Artist Conrad Furey. The images in the mural reflect Conrad's personal experience with cancer, his valued relationships with the staff who cared for him, and pays special tribute to the Knot-a-Breast dragon boat team. The mural hangs in the atrium of the cancer centre and provides, comfort and reflection to patients, staff and visitors.



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