

# Breathing difficulties

There are different causes of breathing difficulties (breathlessness). One possible cause can be cancer that affects the lungs. This includes cancer that has started in the lungs (primary lung cancer) or has spread to the lungs from another part of the body (secondary cancer).

Some other causes include:

- a build-up of fluid around the lung (pleural effusion)
- a build-up of fluid in the tummy area (ascites)
- a chest infection
- low levels of red blood cells (anaemia).

There are other causes of breathlessness. Your doctor can explain what may be causing yours. If your breathlessness gets worse quickly, or you have pain when you breathe, contact your doctor straight away.

The different treatments of breathlessness depend on what is causing it. For example, if cancer is causing it, your doctor may suggest treatment to shrink the cancer. Or if it is caused by a build-up of fluid, the fluid can be drained. Other ways of managing breathlessness include medicines such as painkillers, breathing and relaxation techniques and using a hand-held fan.

Feeling breathless can make you feel panicky and frightened. These feelings can cause fast, shallow breathing, which can make you more breathless. This creates a cycle which makes the breathlessness worse. By getting your breathing under control, you can help to break this cycle. Some of the tips below can help you to manage this.

## Tips for managing breathing difficulties

- Get into a comfortable position that supports your upper chest muscles. This may be sitting in a chair with your back upright, or sitting forward with your elbows leaning on your thighs.
- Practice breathing and relaxation techniques when you are not breathless, so you find them easier when you are.
- Using a hand-held fan is proven to help ease breathlessness. Hold it about 15 cm (6 inches) away from your face. Most people feel it helps after a couple of minutes.
- Sleep with your head and chest raised supported by a few pillows. Your lungs breathe more easily this way rather than lying flat.
- Make a plan of things that help when you are breathless – this can help you feel more in control.
- A physiotherapist and an occupational therapist can help you manage breathlessness. Their help may include teaching breathing techniques, or giving you aids and advice to help make tasks easier.

**Local resources:**

Resource	Contact details

**National resources:**

Resource	Contact details
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The British Lung Foundation</li> <li>• Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation</li> <li>• Cambridge University Hospital Breathless Intervention Service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b><a href="http://www.blf.org.uk">www.blf.org.uk</a></b> Tel: 0300 003 0555</li> <li>• <b><a href="http://www.roycastle.org">www.roycastle.org</a></b> Tel: 0333 323 7200</li> <li>• <b><a href="http://www.cuh.nhs.uk/breathlessness-intervention-service-bis">www.cuh.nhs.uk/breathlessness-intervention-service-bis</a></b></li> </ul>

**Further information**

**[www.macmillan.org.uk/breathlessness](http://www.macmillan.org.uk/breathlessness)**

Our booklets and leaflets are available to order free on **[be.macmillan.org.uk](http://be.macmillan.org.uk)**

- Managing breathlessness
- Relax and breathe CD

**More information and support**

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm, or visit **[macmillan.org.uk](http://macmillan.org.uk)**

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

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