

# Managing breathlessness with a cardiac condition

## Patient and Carer Information

Cardiac Occupational Therapy Service



The Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website is available on the link:  
<https://www.wwl.nhs.uk/patient-information-leaflets> or scan the QR code.

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## Why do I feel breathless?

Breathlessness can be a symptom of an underlying heart condition whereby the heart is less efficient at pumping blood around the body due to muscle damage or there is some restriction in circulation due to narrowed arteries. You are most likely to experience breathlessness on exertion, especially during activities such as walking (especially up inclines), climbing the stairs and bending down to your feet.

Breathlessness is also commonly caused by anxiety and it is quite normal to feel more anxious or stressed following a heart attack/cardiac diagnosis. When we experience anxiety our breathing rate automatically increases and becomes shallow. This can produce a feeling of not being able to breathe properly which can lead to feelings of panic.

## Types of breathing pattern

**Stress chest breathing** is a pattern of breathing that occurs when we become breathless (either through physical exertion or anxiety) and we start to gasp air in through the mouth. This is an automatic reaction to get oxygen into the body as quickly as possible but it is **not** the most efficient method of breathing as we only fill a small part of our lungs. Stress chest breathing also tends to make breathlessness **worse** and can lead to more anxiety or panic.

A more helpful method of breathing is known as **abdominal breathing**. During abdominal breathing we fill more of our lung capacity and this has a naturally calming effect on the body. This gradually slows our breathing rate and reduces anxiety/panic as we bring our breathing under control. During abdominal breathing we breathe in through the nose and slowly out through the mouth with pursed-lips.

## Breathing Control Technique – Pursed Lip Breathing

- Breathe in slowly through your nose for a count of two
- Purse your lips as if you were going to whistle
- Breathe out slow and steady through pursed-lips for a count of four. Let the air escape naturally, **don't force** the air out of your lungs and **don't hold** your breath

- Continue with the above technique until you are no longer short of breath.

## When to apply pursed lip breathing

### When feeling anxious or panicky

As soon as you start to feel anxious, apply the pursed-lip breathing technique. This will help to slow your breathing rate and help you to start feeling more relaxed.

**Before an activity** - whilst you are still at rest/sitting down get your breathing under control before you start to move into an activity.

**During activities** – it is important that you pause at regular intervals and apply the technique. Do not wait until you are very breathless. If you become slightly breathless stop the activity until your breathing is under control. It will take longer for you to recover if you wait until you are gasping for breath.

**After an activity** – apply the technique after an activity.

### Climbing the stairs

- Breathe in through your nose for a count of two at the bottom of the stairs
- Breathe out through pursed lips for a count of four as you climb one or two steps
- Pause, then breathe in again through the nose for a count of two and out again for a count of four as you climb the next one or two steps
- Repeat this pattern until you reach the top.

### Bending (e.g. when bending to dress your lower half)

- When dressing your lower half ensure you are seated
- Breathe in through the nose for a count of two
- As you bend to reach to your feet or the floor, breathe out for a count of four through pursed lips
- As you come back up to a sitting position, breathe in again through your nose
- Repeat as required.

For further information and guidance on these techniques, please contact your cardiac occupational therapist:

Telephone: .....

## Useful information

**Local Pharmacy** - Your local pharmacies offer a wide range of services including information and general advice on symptom relief medicines as well as a prescription collection and delivery service.

Please use this space to write notes or reminders.

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## Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends, and carers.

## Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm)

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## Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



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## How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use, and store the information we hold about you, please see patient information leaflet, Ref. **Corp 006** How we use your information, this can be found on the Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website, see details on the front cover.

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille, and other languages upon request. For more information, please ask in the department/ward.

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