



Supporting someone
with breathlessness



Understanding breathlessness in cancer

Many cancers can cause breathlessness. This can be for a number of different reasons.

These *causes* can include:

- Fluid around the lungs, chest or stomach so that the lungs have less space to inflate and expand with oxygen
- Swelling of the lungs caused by cancer treatments – this swelling can scar the lungs and make airways smaller
- Tumours pressing on airways and sometimes blocking them
- Changes in a patient's posture

Remember: not all of these causes of breathlessness will apply to everyone. Speak with your healthcare team if you have any questions about these.

There are other things that can *trigger* breathlessness or make it feel worse, such as stress or the weather for example. See [Stress, panic and breathlessness](#) on the website for more information.

Have you tried...?

Understand what breathlessness feels like

If you want to know what breathlessness feels like for the patient, try doing the following:

- Take a deep breath in and then breathe out half way. Then breathe in again. Now breathe at that level for a few more breaths.
OR
- Take a deep breath in and hold it as long as you can. What does it feel like?

Now imagine you had to go up some stairs breathing like that. This is what breathlessness can feel like.



What you can do to help the patient

Not all patients want help from carers when they are breathless. Some patients like to be given space to recover their breathing on their own. Other patients may benefit from the carer saying encouraging, reassuring things and reminding them of the following steps:

- **Encourage recovery breathing**

Ask the patient to:

- *Find a comfortable position*
- *Relax shoulders and gently breathe out*
- *Relax the shoulders a little more each time they breathe out*
- *Try to breathe in from their stomach*

It's important to be aware that sometimes breathlessness can look worse to the carer than it feels for the patient.

Ask the patient to think back to a breathlessness episode and describe it to you. Then ask them to rate on a scale of 0-10 how breathlessness they felt (with 0 being “no breathlessness at all” and 10 being the “worst breathlessness”). Compare this with your experience of that same episode and how you would rate it. It may be that you each rated it differently, which often happens, and this can help you when agreeing what things work to manage breathlessness.

Some carers and patients find agreeing on some signals or hand signs helps to communicate what help the patient might need when they are out of breath and cannot speak.

Visit [Ways to ease breathlessness](#) on the website for other useful

Have a look at our videos

There are a video for this support topic over on the website that you may find useful:

- [‘Understand what breathlessness feels like’](#) which shows some steps to follow so that carers can see what breathlessness might feel like

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