

# ASK THE BREATHWORKS COACH

**I'm often out of breath.  
How do I stop my breathlessness?**

Breathlessness – also known as shortness of breath, or dyspnea – is one of the main symptoms of COPD.

Many factors influence shortness of breath. Good nutrition, adequate sleep, anxiety control, regular physical activity, and a healthy environment help our breathing muscles and therefore decrease breathlessness. Laughing, coughing, and talking change the breathing pattern and therefore may bring on shortness of breath. Illnesses like chest infections can also cause breathlessness.

Some people with COPD become breathless with the slightest exertion and feel short of breath nearly all the time. Others only become breathless when walking or exercising. Sometimes, people become breathless just by worrying about their breathing.

Breathlessness resulting from effort is uncomfortable, but it isn't harmful or dangerous in itself. However, if you begin to experience new or worsening symptoms, contact your doctor.

If your COPD is even moderately advanced, you may not be able to completely get rid of your breathlessness. But there are ways of helping yourself. The first step? Learn techniques that control your breathing, and help your lungs and breathing muscles work more effectively.

## 1. Learn breathing exercises

Everyone knows how to breathe naturally, right? But most people with COPD can benefit from learning to breathe in a couple of new and different ways.

Two helpful methods are:

- pursed-lip breathing
- diaphragmatic breathing

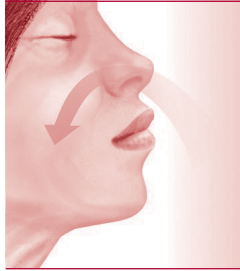
Before you start, ask your doctor if these types of breathing can help you. Also ask whether you need to have your medications changed or the doses adjusted. It's also a good idea to have a physiotherapist or respiratory educator demonstrate these breathing techniques, to make sure you're doing them correctly.

## Pursed-lip breathing

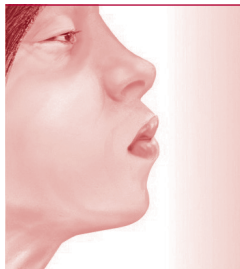
In COPD, the airways tend to close before you're finished breathing out (exhaling). If you can't push the 'used' air out, it's hard to take in a deep breath of fresh, oxygen-rich air. This is why you feel breathless. Pursed-lip breathing helps keep the airways open so stale air can escape. It also helps slow down your breathing, especially when you're doing something that takes effort and uses extra oxygen, like lifting, bending or walking.

**Pursed-lip breathing isn't complicated. In fact, you may already be doing it unknowingly.**

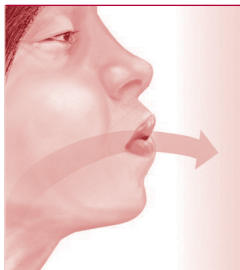
## Pursed-Lip Breathing



**STEP ONE**  
With your mouth closed, breathe in a normal amount of air through your nose.



**STEP TWO**  
Purse your mouth as if you're whistling or making a candle flame flicker gently.



**STEP THREE**  
Keeping your lips pursed, slowly blow the air out through your mouth. Do not strain yourself to force the air out.

**Try to breathe out (exhale) twice as long as you breathe in (inhale). Hint: It can be helpful to count to two as you inhale and to four as you exhale.**

You can use this type of breathing during activities that cause breathlessness, such as walking, or climbing stairs. You can also use pursed-lip breathing when you start feeling panicky and short of breath, to prevent your breathing from spiraling out of control. The trick is to practice when you're relaxed, so you find yourself doing it naturally as soon as you start becoming breathless.

## Diaphragmatic breathing

The diaphragm is the main breathing muscle. It sits at the base of your chest and separates your lungs from your abdomen. Learning to use this muscle more effectively may allow you to control your breathlessness. If you've ever watched a baby sleep, you've seen diaphragmatic breathing in action (babies and toddlers are natural 'belly-breathers') but we adults may

need a little practice to master the technique.

- **STEP ONE** Relax. Start by relaxing your shoulders. Try sitting comfortably in an easy chair.
- **STEP TWO** Place your hands lightly on your abdomen.
- **STEP THREE** Breathe in slowly through your nose. You want to feel your abdomen rise out under your hands.
- **STEP FOUR** Breathe out slowly through pursed lips. Your abdomen should fall inward.



## 2. Control rapid breathing

If you are short of breath, you automatically begin breathing faster, which in turn can make you panicky. Panic can send your breathing spiraling out of control. So how can you put on the brakes?

- Stop and rest in a comfortable position (see suggestions to follow).
- Breathe in through your mouth, blow out through your mouth.
- Breathe in and blow out as fast as necessary.
- Begin to blow out longer, but not forcibly. Use pursed-lip breathing if you find it works for you.
- Begin to slow your breathing.
- Begin to use your nose when breathing in.
- Once your breathing is under control, start diaphragmatic breathing (but only if you know it works for you).
- When you feel less short of breath, stay in this position, and continue pursed-lip breathing for five minutes, or until you feel your breathing is under control.

## 3. Practice proper positioning

Positioning your body properly can help reduce breathlessness. For instance, leaning forward slightly eases pressure on the diaphragm, allowing it to move more easily.

Keeping your arms, shoulders and neck loose and relaxed rests other muscles that help you breathe. (Tight muscles also keep you feeling tense and anxious.) Get into one of the following positions when you're trying to take control of your breathing.

## Sitting

- Place both feet on the ground.
- Lean your head and shoulders forward slightly.
- Rest your arms on your knees, or rest them lightly on a table or chair.
- Keep your arms relaxed. Pushing or grabbing at the table overworks some of smaller breathing muscles. (Hint: Letting your hands rest palms-up may help prevent you from tightening your arm muscles.)



## Standing

- Lean your back against a wall, pole, chair or counter.
- Place your feet slightly apart, and a comfortable distance away from the wall
- Relax and lean your head and shoulders forward slightly.
- Rest your hands lightly on your thighs, or a piece of furniture: Don't lean your weight on your arms.



## 4. Straighten up

Poor posture can make it difficult to breathe. Standing or sitting with your back bent, or shoulders slumped prevents the chest from expanding fully. Concentrate on keeping your spine straight (apart from the natural dip at the base of your back) to give yourself more 'breathing room'. Relaxing your shoulders (no hunching!) also gives some of your breathing muscles a break.

## 5. Exercise control

Many people with COPD find it difficult to exercise – some even avoid normal activities to avoid breathlessness. But that strategy is bound to backfire. The less physically active you are, the weaker your muscles become, so you actually have to work harder to do day-to-day things like lifting a bag of groceries, or taking a few steps. Staying as active as possible can help break this 'vicious cycle of breathlessness'.

Specially-designed exercise programs, tailored to your needs and abilities by a physiotherapist, are also very helpful. Check out The Lung Association factsheets **Exercise** and **Pulmonary Rehabilitation**, or call your local Lung Association office for more information.

## 6. Budget your energy

Learning how to 'budget' your energy can help you bring your breathlessness under control. Pacing and planning your activities, and re-organizing your home can allow you to accomplish your tasks without breathlessness. Sitting to dress yourself, allowing dishes to air dry, and economizing on stair climbing are all simple ways of saving energy. For more 'energy conservation' techniques, see The Lung Association's **Energy Management** factsheet.

## 7. Ease anxiety

Emotional stress can make you breathe more rapidly. This in turn, can trigger breathlessness. So how can you cope with anxiety? Here are a few ideas:

- Think ahead and avoid situations that cause stress.
- Make plans for situations you can't avoid, but which might cause you to become breathless. If you're traveling by air, for example, arrange for a wheelchair so you won't get winded walking from one part of the airport to another.
- If you start feeling anxious, sit down and collect your thoughts. Practice pursed-lip breathing. Remind yourself of the last time pursed-lip breathing and relaxation eased your breathlessness. Sit still for a few minutes while you calm down.
- Talk about your anxieties with your family and friends. If they're aware of emotional triggers, they can help you deal with them.
- Consider using a walker in situations where you experience breathlessness – long walks in the mall, for example.
- Consider therapy for your anxiety. Talk to your doctor about possible choices.
- Relax and try your best to remember that most things can wait. You don't have to do everything in one day, and you can ask for help.

**If I learn to control my breathing, do I still need to take my medications?**

Yes! Continue taking all medications as prescribed by your doctor, even if you feel you have better control of your breathing.

**Will oxygen help control my breathlessness?**

Oxygen therapy is not a cure-all. It's only helpful if you have critically low levels of oxygen in your blood (hypoxemia). If your doctor suspects you have hypoxemia, you will be sent for a blood test that measures how much oxygen is in your blood. For more information on oxygen therapy, check out The Lung Association's factsheet

**What you need to know about oxygen.**

**Remember,  
you can do it!**



*All images, except 'coach', used with permission from **Living Well with COPD™** - A plan of action for life self-management education program.*

---

Get the information and support you need from one of our  
**Breathworks COPD educators.**

Phone **1-866-717-COPD (2673)** or visit us online at  
**[www.lung.ca/breathworks](http://www.lung.ca/breathworks)** .

---

B R E A T H W © R K S ™