

Managing Your Shortness of Breath

This handout offers information on what you can do when you have shortness of breath (difficulty breathing). Shortness of breath is the feeling that you're not getting enough air. This information may allow you to continue doing some of the things you like to do.

What you can do to conserve (save) your energy:

- Schedule rest periods throughout your day. Rest between your activities.
- Sit down while you are getting dressed.
- Do not talk while you are walking or eating.
- Push objects instead of pulling them.
- When you need to climb stairs, rest between each step.
- Keep items you need close to you.
- During intimacy with your partner, a standing or sitting position may be more comfortable.
- Ask for help with your shopping. It may help to use a shopping cart or small wheeled backpack.
- Do not bend over at the waist.
- Use a walker or wheelchair if needed.
- Breathing and relaxation exercises can help you. See the back of this page for exercises you can do.

Changes in your diet that can help:

- Eat smaller meals more often.
- Drink lots of fluids.
- If you have an increase in phlegm (mucous), eat and drink fewer dairy products.

Equipment to use that may help you:

- Pillows to raise your head and shoulders.
- A reclining chair with a footrest.

Ask a member of your healthcare team about other equipment that may help you (example: a bedrail or a bath/shower bar).

Changes in your environment that can help:

- Open a window or use a table fan to allow air to flow in your home.
- Stay indoors when the weather is too hot, too humid, or too cold.
- Use cool water when showering or bathing.
- It may help you to stay away from anyone who is smoking, strong odors (for example: perfumes, flowers, paint or cleaner fumes) and pets.

It is important for you to:

- Take the medication that was prescribed for your shortness of breath.
- Have regular visits with your healthcare team.
- Talk to your family, friends or a member of your healthcare team about your feelings.

Relaxation and breathing exercises to help you when you feel you are short of breath

1. A relaxation exercise (it may help to listen to music as you are doing this exercise)

- Find a position that is comfortable for you.
- Close your eyes or fix them on an object.
- As you breathe in and out, quietly say in your mind “relax”.
- Think of a place that is relaxing to you.

2. A gentle breathing exercise

When you first start to do this breathing exercise, you may cough more. If this happens, it is okay to stop and rest for a few minutes. It may help to have a drink of water before you begin the exercise again.

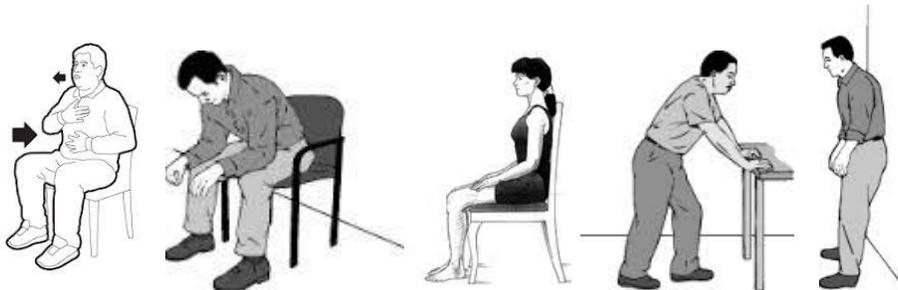
- Sit in a position that is comfortable for you.
- Relax your shoulders.
- Take a breath in through your nose, then purse/pucker your lips like you are blowing out a candle and gently blow out through your mouth.
- Count to 4 with each breath in. Then count to 8 as you breathe out.
- Do this exercise 3 to 4 times in a row.

Do this exercise three times a day and whenever you feel that you are short of breath.

To see a video on other breathing and relaxation exercises, go to the following link on the internet:

www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB

These positions may help you breathe easier:



Call your family doctor or a member of your healthcare team if:

- You have a new or increasing cough.
- Your breathing is noisy.
- You have a change in the color or texture of phlegm (mucous).

Go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to you if you:

- Are struggling to breathe and feeling nervous.
- Have a sudden, new or increasing chest pain or tightness.
- Have a fever above 38.3° C/100.9°F at any time or above 38.0° C/100.4°F for more than an hour
- Wake up from sleeping with sudden shortness of breath.

If you have a problem or concern about a symptom or side effect from your cancer treatment:

1. Call your primary nurse at the cancer centre from Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4 pm, (except on holidays). Use the phone number your primary nurse gave you.
2. Contact CareChart Digital Health from Monday to Friday, 5 pm to 8:30 am and anytime on weekends and holidays for symptom management support.

Talk to a nurse using one of these options:

- Call the after-hours telephone line at 1-877-681-3057.
- Request a video call by going to www.carechart.ca.
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Call 911 or go to the emergency department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency. Please talk to any member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

For more information about how you can manage your symptoms, go to Ontario Health - Cancer Care Ontario's website found at: www.cancercare.on.ca/symptoms

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