

What is breathlessness?

Breathlessness is feeling short of breath. It is also called “dyspnea”.

If you have breathlessness, only you can describe what it feels like. When you are short of breath, you may:

- Feel like you cannot breathe.
- Feel like your lungs won't fill with air.
- Fake a sound when breathing in or out.
- Feel angry, upset or frustrated.

You may experience breathlessness only when you are exercising or when you are resting. Tell your health care team as soon as you experience breathlessness or if your breathlessness gets worse.

What causes breathlessness?

There are many causes of breathlessness:

- Lung disease such as lung cancer, bronchitis or asthma.
- Low iron in your blood (anemia).
- Pain that stops you from taking a deep breath.
- Fluid in your lungs.
- Blood vessels that bring blood to your lungs may be blocked.
- Some medications.
- Allergies.

When should I talk to my health care team?

If you need help right away, call 9-1-1 or go to your nearest emergency department.

Let your health care team know as soon as you experience breathlessness. Tell your health care team if your breathlessness gets worse.

Your health care team will work with you to figure out what is causing your breathlessness.

What are the treatments for breathlessness?

The treatment for breathlessness will depend on the cause. If your health care team cannot cure the cause, they may still be able to help you breathe easier with some medications:

- Opioids such as morphine or hydromorphone.
- Medications that help you relax and take away anxiety, such as Lorazepam.
- Inhaled medications, such as Ventolin, can be taken with a puffer or a nebuliser (a machine that turn medicines into a vapour you can breathe in).

What can I do for myself?

There are many things you can do to help with your breathlessness:

- Practice relaxation exercises (see below).
- Get a handheld fan - blowing air across your face using a fan can be very helpful.
- Open a window.

- When you are inside, make sure you can always see a door and/or windows.
- Cook meals for more than one day at a time. Freeze meals for heating up later.
- Keep things within easy reach, so you do not have to walk far to get them.
- Set-up places to rest at home, such as a chair near the shower or in the hallway.
- Ask friends and family to help you with things like grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning.
- Exercise as much as you are able to. This will keep your muscles strong and make breathing easier.
- Dress to keep warm in winter and cool in summer.

If you are unsure about any of these things, please talk to your health care team.

So you do not get short of breath, try not to:

- Hold your breath.
- Wear tight clothing.
- Strain (push hard) when going to the bathroom.
- Lift anything heavier than 10 pounds or 5 kilograms (about as heavy as a large bag of flour).
- Go into saunas or steam rooms.
- Swim in a chlorinated pool.
- Breathe heavy fumes or smells.
- Be in a crowded room

These treatments may help you with your breathlessness:

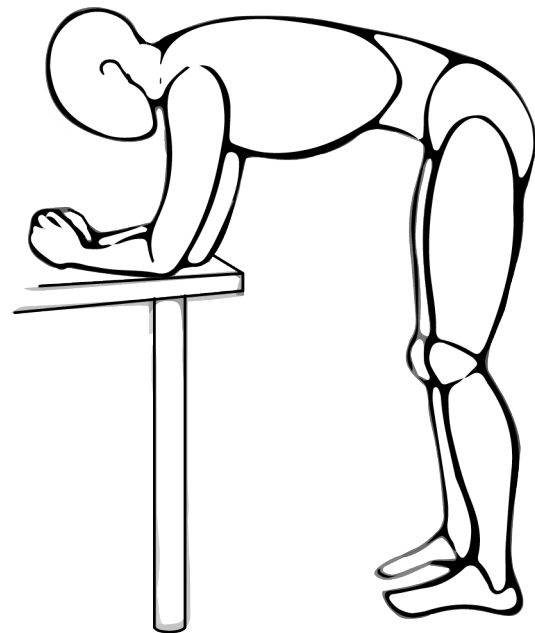
- Acupuncture or acupressure.
- Respiratory therapy.
- Physiotherapy.

Please talk to your health care team about these treatments.

Relaxation positions

These positions can help you relax and breathe easier.

Leaning on a table



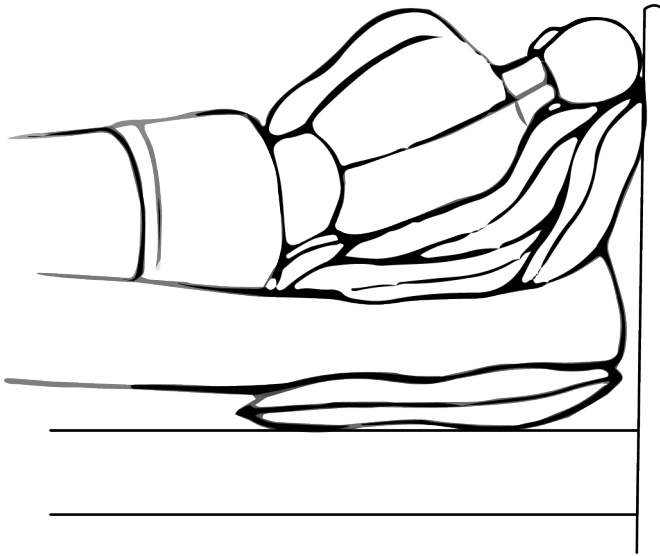
Stand and lean forward on a table.

Rest your elbows and lower arms on the table.

Spread your arms wide apart.

Keep your back straight.

Lying on pillows in bed



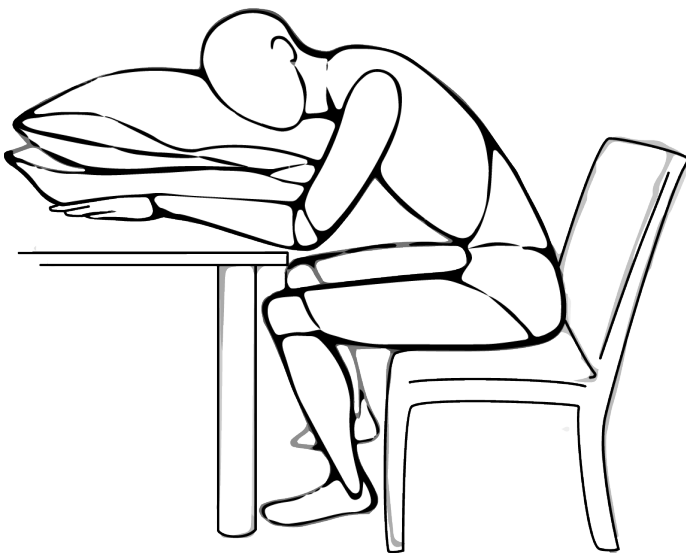
Stack pillows on your bed to make a slope.

You can stack them on top of your mattress or under your mattress.

Lie down on your side.

Make sure your whole side is supported.

Resting on pillows stacked on a table



Sit on a chair in front of a table, keeping your feet on the floor.

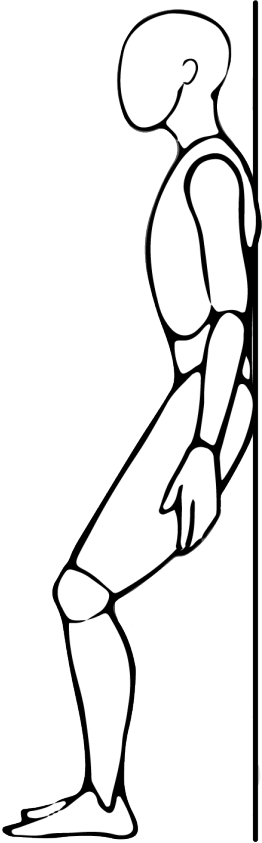
Stack pillows on the table to the height of your chest.

Lean forward from your hips, keeping your back straight.

Rest your head, upper chest and shoulders on the pillows.

Your arms should be relaxed and resting on the table.

Leaning against a wall



Lean the lower half of your back against a wall.

Place your feet about 30 cm (12 inches) from the wall.

Relax your shoulders.

Your arms should be hanging loosely by your side.

Sitting on a chair



Sit on a chair, keeping your feet on the floor.

Lean forward, keeping your back straight.

Rest your forearms on your thighs.

Relax your wrists.

Where can I learn more?

- BC Cancer Library Breathlessness/Dyspnea pathfinder: <https://bccancer.libguides.com/pathfinder-dyspnea>
- Providence Health Care Respiratory Therapy: respiratorytherapy.providencehealthcare.org/
- BC Cancer Supportive Care Services: www.bccancer.bc.ca/supportivecare

