

## Breathlessness Management Tips

Sudden breathlessness can be frightening, but it usually passes after a few minutes. Knowing what steps to take can reduce the panic that breathlessness causes. It can even reduce the breathlessness itself because the body and mind are very closely connected when it comes to feeling like you aren't getting enough air. Breathlessness can happen as part of many health problems, but is especially common in lung and heart conditions.

The reverse side of this page has a "breathlessness action plan" that you and your nurse will discuss together. This can be used by you, your family and caregivers. Have it nearby. You may want more than one copy for different locations in your home.

Sometimes breathlessness can be prevented, or at least made less severe by being prepared. ***Some tips that may help you prevent severe breathlessness include:***

- Weigh yourself regularly if you have heart disease and let your nurse know if your weight has increased by 5 pounds or more.
- Let your nurse know if you develop an increased cough or dark phlegm.
- If you have difficulty swallowing, eat slowly, and tuck your chin when you swallow.
- Pace yourself during exertion rather than rushing to get through it.
- Keep your shower shorter and less hot.
- Pre-medicate with an inhaler medication or opioid before activity you know will make you breathless.
- Practice self-calming skills. **The mind is a powerful part of our experience of breathlessness and our recovery from it.** Your hospice team can teach you these techniques.
- Avoid exposure to irritants such as wood smoke, dust or strong odors.

Signs of severe breathlessness include:

- Inability to speak in full sentences or to talk at all
- Blue color to lips or hands
- Use of the muscles of the chest or abdomen to help breathing
- Anxiousness or panic
- Rapid breathing
- Noisy breathing

It may be helpful to develop a hand signal for when breathlessness is severe, as it may not be possible to talk when breathless. Always notify your hospice nurse if breathlessness is increasing. **Hospice of the Northwest 360-814-5550**

## BREATHLESSNESS ACTION PLAN

- **STAY CALM.** Quiet the room. Speak slowly and in a calm voice.
- **REASSURE.** Let the person know you are there to help and will stay nearby if they wish.
- **REPOSITION.** Usually sitting upright, even leaning forward supporting weight on elbows or arms helps. Patients with pulmonary fibrosis or other forms of stiff lung may breathe better lying flat.
- **FAN.** Turn fan to the face. Open a window.
- **OXYGEN.** Place oxygen or turn up flow. Turn it back down after recovery. Check that oxygen is turned on, tubing is connected, and tubing is not kinked.
- **BREATHING.** Encourage in-breath through the nose and out-breath through pursed lips.
- **RELAXATION.** Use techniques that help quiet the mind and reduce fear: music, prayer, focused breath, hand or back massage, meditation, guided imagery, focusing on a view or beautiful object, saying a mantra.

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- **MEDICATIONS.** Have the medications for breathlessness nearby. These may include oxygen, a rescue inhaler or nebulizer, an opioid and/or a sedative. Have your nurse write the medication plan here and adjust it as needed.

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- **ASK.** Is the breathlessness is getting better? Is time to call the hospice nurse?  
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- Other ideas:

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