

Managing Your Shortness of Breath

This handout offers information on how to manage shortness of breath (difficulty breathing). Shortness of breath is the feeling that you're not getting enough air.

Talk to your healthcare team about medications that may help lessen your shortness of breath.

How to conserve (save) your energy:

- Schedule rest periods throughout the day. Rest between activities.
- Sit down while you are getting dressed.
- Do not talk while you are walking or eating.
- Push objects instead of pulling them.
- Use the handrail and rest between each step when you need to climb stairs.
- 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.
- Use breathing and relaxation exercises when you feel short of breath. See page 2 of this handout for information on how to do these exercises.

Changes in your diet that may help:

- Eat smaller meals more often.
- Drink 6 to 8 cups (1 cup = 250 ml) of fluid a day.
- Eat and drink less dairy products. Dairy products can increase the amount of phlegm (mucous) you experience.

Changes in your environment that may help:

- Use pillows to raise your head and shoulders while you are lying down.
- Sit in a reclining chair with a footrest.
- Open a window or use a table fan to allow air to flow in your home.
- Stay indoors when it too hot or humid outside, Use air conditioning (if available) when the weather is hot. Go to a cooling centre in your community if you do not have air conditioning.
- Stay indoors when it is very cold outside.
- Use warm water when showering or bathing. Hot water can increase your feelings of fatigue.
- It may help you to stay away from anyone who is smoking, strong odors (for example: perfumes, flowers, paint or cleaner fumes) and pets.

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

Relaxation and breathing exercises to use when you feel short of breath

1. 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. Gentle breathing exercise

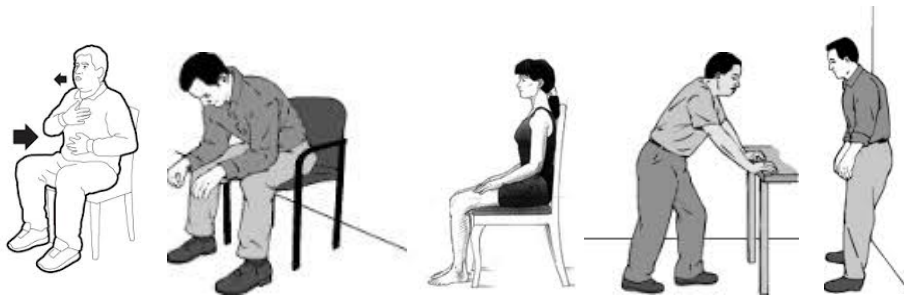
When you first start to do this breathing exercise, you may cough more. If this happens, it is okay to stop and rest for a few minutes. It may help to have a drink of water before you begin the exercise again.

- 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 these exercises three times a day and whenever you feel short of breath. Click on the link below to view videos on how to do other breathing and relaxation exercises:

[youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB](https://www.youtube.com/user/ManagingSOB)

These positions may help you breathe easier:



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, 4 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 [carechart.ca](https://www.carechart.ca)
- Use the CareChart Digital Health App. This App is available to download for iOS or Android devices.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team as soon as possible 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 not able to talk to a member of your healthcare team.

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.

Call 911 or go to the Emergency Department at the hospital closest to you for a medical emergency.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or do not understand any of the information in this handout.

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

This handout was created by the Patient Education Program at the Durham Regional Cancer Centre/Lakeridge Health. It was last reviewed in May 2026.