

Shortness of breath: Pacing advice

Physiotherapy Department



Patient information leaflet

This leaflet is designed for patients who suffers from shortness of breath and have been advised to practice pacing.

It includes general information and advice and may help to answer some of the questions that can arise.

Name:

Physiotherapist:

Date:

What is pacing?

Being breathless can be difficult to live with and even frightening at times. But there are ways to manage it. This leaflet aims to enable you to know how to pace yourself, in order to keep control over your breathing.

If you have a medical condition that makes you short of breath when you do things, it can be quite tempting to rush that activity to get it over with as soon as possible. However by rushing it will make you more short of breath and need more time to recover.

Pacing allows you to continue doing activities you enjoy but in a more controlled way.

Pacing does not mean stopping activities or cutting back. It is a way of taking your time and spacing activities that then allows you to complete them.

How do I pace myself?

Becoming short of breath during exertion is natural. Different people will reach this breathlessness at different times and on different activities. For example one person may only struggle with their breathing when walking up a steep hill, whilst someone else may get short of breath climbing stairs or getting dressed.

Either way, the method of pacing is the same. This leaflet will explain what is 'good breathlessness' and what is 'bad breathlessness' and how to keep active with these in mind.

'Good breathlessness' is still being able to say a short sentence during an activity.

Let's take walking as an example. If you're feeling short of breath but can still say a phrase out loud such as:

"This exercise is good for me"

then you are at a good level and can keep going at this pace. However if you could have a conversation, you have the ability to do more, such as walking at a faster pace.

'Bad breathlessness' is when you try to speak but are only able to get one or two words out before needing to take another breath.

If you are at this point then slow down. Pause until your breathing has recovered enough for you to continue.

What to do when I get too breathless?

Try to relax your shoulders. If your muscles are tense it takes longer to recover. You may find the following positions useful to aid in recovery:



Leaning forwards onto your forearms



Leaning forward onto a walking frame whilst stationary.

Hand rails along the wall can also be useful.



Leaning back against a wall, allowing it to support you.

Now that you're in the most relaxed posture try to focus on controlling your breath.

You don't need to take large breaths, instead try taking normal breaths but making your breath out longer.

As you breathe out slowly, allow your muscles to relax more each time. You can also try making your lips into a small 'O' shape as if whistling. This is called pursed lip breathing and provides more support to your lungs. However, try to keep the breaths gentle and relaxed still.

General advice

- Try and walk a little each day to improve your fitness. It needs to be at a pace that challenges your breathing, but maintaining that 'good breathlessness'.
- Do talk out loud when exercising. This allows you to hear how hard your breathing is.
- Try breathing out through pursed lips when doing a difficult task. Such as picking up a laundry basket, or climbing a step.
- Take frequent breaks – multiple short rests are more beneficial than fewer long rests.
- Spread tasks throughout the week so you're not doing too many on one day.

Reference source

- Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care, 2017:
Leaflet No GL-03 "Energy conservation"
Leaflet No GL-01 "Positions of Ease"
Leaflet No GL-02 "Breathing Exercises"
- www.macmillan.org.uk
"Tips to help you breathe more easily"
www.macmillan.org.uk/information-and-support/coping/side-effects-and-symptoms/breathlessness/tips-to-help-you-breathe-more-easily.html#5002

This leaflet was written by the Respiratory Physiotherapists at Royal Surrey County Hospital.

Physiotherapy Department contact details

For further information please do not hesitate to contact your physiotherapist.

Telephone: 01483 464153 (direct line)

PALS and Advocacy contact details

Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

Telephone: 01483 402757

Email: rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net

Opening hours: 9.00am–3.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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