

Breathing difficulties

There are different causes of [breathing difficulties \(breathlessness\)](#). One possible cause can be cancer that affects the lungs. This includes cancer that has started in the lungs ([primary lung cancer](#)) or has spread to the lungs from another part of the body ([secondary cancer](#)).

Some other causes include:

- a build-up of fluid around the lung ([pleural effusion](#))
- a build-up of fluid in the tummy area ([ascites](#))
- a chest infection
- low levels of red blood cells (anaemia).

There are other causes of breathlessness. Your doctor can explain what may be causing yours. If your breathlessness starts to get worse or gets worse quickly, see a doctor straight away. You may need treatment quickly.

Treatments for breathlessness will depend on what is causing it. For example, if breathlessness is caused by a build-up of fluid, the fluid can be drained. Your GP or cancer doctor can refer you to services such as a breathlessness clinic, that can help you manage your breathlessness. Or they can prescribe medicines such as painkillers or steroids to help.

There are some things that you can do to help manage your breathlessness. For example, you can learn breathing techniques such as [relaxed tummy breathing \(controlled breathing\)](#) or [pursed lip breathing](#).

Feeling breathless can make you feel anxious. Anxiety may make you breathe too fast and take shallow breaths. Breathing in this way can make you feel more breathless, which in turn makes you feel more anxious. By getting your breathing under control, you can help to break this cycle.

Some of the tips below can help you to manage this.

Tips for managing breathing difficulties

- Get into a comfortable position that supports your upper chest muscles. This may be sitting in a chair in an upright position, with your back supported. Or sitting forward with your elbows and lower arms resting on your thighs.
- Practice [breathing and relaxation techniques](#) when you are not breathless, so you find them easier when you are.
- Using a hand-held fan is proven to help ease breathlessness. Hold it about 15cm (6 inches) away from your face. Many people usually notice a difference within a few minutes.
- If you are in bed, try to sit up with your head and back supported by pillows. This allows you to expand and open your chest area.
- Write down a simple plan of what you will do when you are breathless. Have your plan nearby to reassure you of the steps you need to take.
- Physical activity can improve your breathing. Even people with severe breathing problems benefit from small amounts of physical activity. A physiotherapist can give you advice on the correct type of physical activity for you.

Macmillan Cancer Support resources

We have more information on our [website](#), including audiobooks. Or you can order our free booklets and leaflets on be.macmillan.org.uk such as:

- [Managing breathlessness](#).

We produce information in a [range of formats](#) and [languages](#). To order these, visit our website or call our support line.

Further Macmillan support

If you have more questions or would like to talk to someone, call the Macmillan Support Line free on **0808 808 00 00**, 7 days a week, 8am to 8pm. Or visit macmillan.org.uk where you can [chat to us online](#).

Deaf or hard of hearing? Call using NGT (Text Relay) on **18001 0808 808 00 00**, or use the NGT Lite app. Speak another language? Telephone interpreters are available. Please tell us in English the language you would like to use.

Our free [Macmillan Buddy service](#) can arrange weekly calls or visits with a friendly volunteer who understands what you're going through.

Or if you want to share your experiences or ask questions, you can find others who understand on our [Online Community](#).

Other useful contact details

- Asthma and Lung UK – visit www.asthmaandlung.org.uk or call **0300 222 5800**
- Cambridge University Hospital Breathless Intervention Service – visit www.cuh.nhs.uk/our-services/breathlessness-intervention-service
- Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation – visit www.roycastle.org or call **0333 323 7200**

Notes and questions

