

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](#)) and cancer that 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 gets worse quickly, or you have pain when you breathe, contact your doctor straight away.

The treatments you may have for your breathlessness depend on what is causing it. For example, if cancer is causing it, your doctor may suggest treatment to shrink the cancer. Or if it is caused by a build-up of fluid, the fluid can be drained. Other ways of [managing breathlessness](#) include medicines such as painkillers, [breathing and relaxation techniques](#), and using a hand-held fan.

Feeling breathless can make you feel panicky and frightened. These feelings can cause fast, shallow breathing, which can make you more breathless. This creates a cycle which makes the breathlessness worse. 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 with your back upright, or sitting forward with your elbows leaning 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 15 cm (6 inches) away from your face. Most people feel it helps after a couple of minutes.
- Sleep with your head and chest raised, supported by a few pillows. Your lungs breathe more easily this way than lying flat.
- Make a plan of things that help when you are breathless. This can help you feel more in control.
- A physiotherapist or occupational therapist can help you manage breathlessness. Their help may include teaching breathing techniques, or giving you aids and advice to help make tasks easier.

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](#)
- [Relax and breathe – audiobook](#).

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.

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

- British Lung Foundation – visit www.blf.org.uk or call 0300 003 0555
- Cambridge University Hospital Breathlessness 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
