

Guide when dealing with shortness of breath

Patient/ Family/Whānau guide

What is shortness of breath?

- Shortness of breath or breathlessness is an uncomfortable feeling of having difficulty breathing
- It can be described as not getting enough air (a feeling that you cannot get your breath), it may feel like the room is closing in or there is not enough air in the room.
- This is experienced differently by each person.

When should I be worried about my shortness of breath?

- When it stops you from doing what you want to do
- When it causes you or your family fear or anxiety, nervousness or restlessness
- Bluish discoloration of face, nose, fingers, toes.

What can be done?

There are things that you, your caregiver and your health care team can do for shortness of breath. Your health care team will always try to discover the underlying cause and discuss treatments with you.

- Record what makes you feel short of breath and what decreases it.
- Elevate your head or sit in a chair or recliner.
- If in bed, sit upright with pillows. This will not be possible sometimes due to weakness/pain etc.
- Increase air movement by using an open window or fan.
- Keep the room cool – cool cloths to face, or bowl of ice in front of a fan.
- A quiet environment can decrease feelings of anxiety. Touch may or may not be appropriate. Massage the person's feet and hands if tolerated.
- Visits from family and friends is important but remember that talking can be tiring for a person with breathlessness.
- Relax with spiritual support, yoga, aromatherapy, calming music, podcasts, massage or something you find helpful.
- Use the medications as directed by your doctor; these can reduce the feeling of being 'breathless'.
- For **many** people oxygen **does not** help shortness of breath. Very occasionally it may be prescribed, if your doctor thinks it will help. Home oxygen requires a referral from your GP to the respiratory team at the hospital. If prescribed, use oxygen as directed.

Complete the **action plan** below with your health professional to make your own individual plan for managing breathlessness.

ACTION PLAN

Patient Name

Step 1		
	What positions help my breathing	• Sitting upright. • Leaning over a table. • Leaning forward over a chair. • Standing against a wall.
	What strategies help me breath slowly and gently	• Use positive, reassuring self-talk. "This will pass". • Remind yourself "slow down...calm, relax... it will be okay" because you can slow your breathing and get enough air. Allow yourself to feel comfortable and at ease. • Focus on your slow and gentle out breath making the out breath twice as long as your in breath. Don't think about breathing in, it will happen naturally. • Rectangle breathing-Imagine a TV screen or a book. The in breath is the short side of the rectangle and breathing out is the long side. • Breathing in through your nose - (like smelling roses) and breathe out through pursed lips the shape of an 'O' as if through a straw, or gently blowing a candle out.
	Find a position the supports your head and shoulders to relax	• Sigh slowly and gently let out a soft sound while you flop and drop your shoulders. • Elbows resting on knees. • Or sit/recline well supported.
	Fresh air blowing	• Use a fan, air blowing across /around me (not directly on my face) or a handheld fan. • A bowl of ice in front of a fan may also be beneficial. • Fresh air, try having a door/window open to bring in fresh air.
	What can others do to help me	• Keep noise level down. • Avoid my having to talk for long periods-They can try using questions that I only have to say yes/no to. • Someone present can be reassuring when I am breathless.
Step 2		
Discuss this with your GP or Hospice Nurse.		
	What medications do I use	Inhalers.....
		Benzodiazepines.....
		Opiates.....
Step 3		
Repeat your steps – if not working see your GP or in case of emergency ring St Johns		