



## Occupational Therapy

# Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) And Breathlessness

**Patient information factsheet: A guide to energy  
conservation.**



## What is Occupational Therapy?

Occupational Therapists support people to overcome challenges in completing everyday tasks or activities. An activity can be anything from washing or dressing, washing up dishes, folding clothes or taking part in hobbies, like dancing, or socialising. Occupational therapists will look beyond your diagnosis and its limitations and identify new opportunities that will change the way you feel about the future.

## How can Occupational Therapists help you?

- They will look at the impact of your COPD and your environment and identify different ways that could help you carry out your activities.
- Identify what assistive equipment you might need to improve your independence. Examples of assistive equipment are mobility aids such as walking sticks and wheeled zimmer frames; toileting or bathing aids; aids for the bed.
- Promote and maintain your independence and self-management.
- Refer to community teams for ongoing support.

## What is COPD?

COPD refers to a group of lung conditions that cause breathing difficulties. This includes:

- Emphysema - a condition that damages the lung air sacs
- Chronic bronchitis - long-term inflammation of the airways

A good way to remember COPD is:

**C**hronic - long-term condition

**O**bstructive = narrowed airways

**P**ulmonary = affects the lungs

**D**isease = medical condition



## What is Breathlessness?

- Your body needs more oxygen and energy when you do something that requires physical effort. Getting out of breath is normal.
- However, some people can feel out of breath when they are not doing anything or exerting themselves. They feel like they can't control their breathing.
- This unpleasant and uncomfortable breathing sensation can be upsetting and tiring for people.
- Breathlessness is a very personal experience. It can be worsened by feeling tired or being worried and can affect the way you perform your daily activities.

## Breathing Techniques

### 1. Pursed-lips breathing (also called Candle Breathing)

- This can be used to help you control your breathing.
- Gently breathe in through your nose and then purse your lips as though you are going to blow out a candle. Blow out with your lips in this position.

### 2. Blow-as-you-go

- This technique can make tasks easier and can be used while doing something that you find makes you breathless.
- Breathe in before you do something that makes you breathless, then breathe out while you're doing the thing that makes you breathless. For example, breathe in before standing up then breathe out as you stand.

### 3. Paced breathing

- This technique is useful when you are exercising/active.
- As you walk or move, count to yourself (for example, take a breath in before moving, and after walking 1-2 steps, breath out).



## What to do when you are breathless and feeling scared

- Try to Stay calm.
- Sit down if possible.
- Lean forward (on a table, against a wall etc).
- Relax your shoulders and stomach muscles.
- Do pursed lip breathing and try to exhale as long as possible.
- Do some deep breathing. **Do not do more than five deep breaths at a time.**
- Use a handheld fan.
- Relaxation or mindfulness techniques may ease your feelings of tension and anxiety.

## What is Energy Conservation?

- For people with COPD, completing tasks such as washing, dressing, and housekeeping requires you to use more energy. This may leave you feeling short of breath or feeling tired.
- Energy conservation is a way of doing tasks simply so that you do not use up all your energy. By using energy conservation techniques, you will have more energy to use during the day, feel less tired and put less strain on your body.
- Your therapist will also consider equipment that will support you in carrying out your day-to-day activities.

### Energy Conservation Techniques aim to:

- Use your energy carefully.
- Prioritise/ using energy for tasks that are important for you.
- Reduce fatigue.
- Adopt energy-efficient body postures.
- Increase your independence.
- Finding easier ways to complete tasks.

## The Five P's of Energy Conservation

### 1. Planning ahead

- Remember not everything has to be done every day or all in one day.
- Try to plan ahead and spread these tasks out over the day or throughout the week, to stop yourself using all your energy in one go.
- Aim to have times set out to rest across your day and week.



## 2. Pacing

- This means breaking tasks down into smaller more manageable chunks with rests.
- Try to do the more difficult tasks when you are feeling your best and allow yourself enough time.
- You'll recover quicker if you work on a task until you feel tired rather than exhausted.

## 3. Prioritise

- Do the tasks that are important to you and try to remove unnecessary tasks.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help, ask yourself can someone else do the housework or shopping to allow you to do things that bring you joy.

## 4. Positioning

- Having a good posture when completing tasks will save you energy. An example of this is sitting rather than standing when showering or washing up.

## 5. Positive Attitude

- Some days will be easier than others. Don't beat yourself up if you haven't completed all the tasks, you set out to do.
- Be kind to yourself as negative thoughts and emotions about ourselves will add to your tiredness and fatigue.

## Tips for energy conservation

- Take frequent breaks.
- Plan the day. Switch between tasks which require more energy during the day or week. Do not schedule too many tasks in one day.
- Allow enough time to complete the task.
- Use good posture and body mechanics.
- Prepare objects prior to starting the task and keep them within reach.
- Avoid excessive reaching, bending, twisting.
- Do tasks that matter to you.
- Ask for help with tasks such as housekeeping, shopping etc.
- Use equipment to make the task easier.
- Do not wait until you are short of breath or tired before you stop and rest.
- Plan to take regular breaks.
- Sit when you are completing tasks when you can.
- Do not aim to complete tasks post meals.
- Try to get enough sleep.
- Try different ways to complete tasks and find what works for you.



## Putting this into practice

### Washing yourself

- If you have been prescribed oxygen it is safe to use the nasal prongs in the shower/bath. **Do not move or place oxygen machines in/near the water.**
- Allow time for the task.
- Gather all items you need before starting.
- Open the bathroom window or door to reduce steam.
- Sit to dress/undress, wash, shave and for drying.
- Have a strip wash on alternative days if able.
- Immediately after showering put on a dressing gown or use a small towel to soak up water rather than using a heavy bath towel.
- Use electric appliances such as toothbrushes or shavers if able.
- Use equipment (Your therapist will assess your needs for this).
- Limit bending and reaching.
- Avoid aerosol deodorants try to use roll-ons instead.
- Wear clothes that are easy to put on and avoid tight clothing.

### Dressing yourself

- Sit to dress and undress (or putting on make-up).
- Allow time for the task.
- Gather all items you need before starting.
- Wear clothes that are easy to put on and avoid tight clothing.
- Dress lower half first if able to avoid restricting your movement.
- Use dressing aids or a foot stool to limit bending.
- Consider slip on shoes.
- In cold or windy weather use a warm scarf to cover your mouth and breathe through your nose. This will help warm the air before it enters your lungs and can help stop your symptoms worsening.

### Walking or exercising

- Take medication, if possible, before you begin exercising or an activity.
- Take regular breaks.
- Walk until you feel tired but not exhausted.
- Use your breathing techniques.
- Use a handheld fan.



## Stairs

- If you find stairs difficult, try to reduce the number of times you do this.
- Try to breath in before each step, when you have both legs on the step, then breath out and repeat.
- Climb 4-5 steps at a time, rest for 30 seconds then repeat.
- Have a chair near the top/bottom of the stairs where you can sit and rest if needed.

## Cooking

- Spread food preparation tasks throughout the day.
- Get all the items ready before you start.
- Sit down where possible to wash up, prepare vegetables and mix ingredients.
- Cook large quantities of food and freeze them to be used at a later date when you are feeling fatigued.
- Use ready-made meals to reduce meal preparation.
- Position the items you use most in easier to reach places and closer together to minimise reaching and bending.
- Fill your kettle using a plastic jug.
- Use a kitchen trolley to move items between rooms.
- Use appliances to save your energy such as the dishwasher or microwave.
- Sit regularly while preparing or checking food.
- Buy pre-pared vegetables.

## Shopping

- Have a break before starting your food shop.
- Plan your shopping list by food aisles.
- Use a high trolley rather than a basket.
- Shop at quieter times.
- Take your time going around the shop.
- Pack similar items together so it will be easier to unpack.
- Spread heavier items across shopping bags.
- If you are tired put the perishable items away first, then rest. You can finish the task later.
- Consider online shopping or asking family/friends to help.



## Household Cleaning

- Plan to spread tasks throughout the week.
- Get all the items ready before you start.
- Empty rubbish bins regularly.
- Try to do a mix of heavy and light tasks in a day.
- Rest between tasks.
- Sit where possible such as for ironing or polishing.
- Avoid aerosols that trigger your breathlessness.
- Soak dishes overnight.
- Use a long-handled brush and dustpan.
- Clean one room or part of a room at a time.
- Use a long-handled reacher to put thing in/out of the washing machine and dryer.
- Consider using a clothes horse.
- Ask family, friends or pay someone to help with more difficult tasks such as vacuuming and changing bed sheets.

### Patient advice and liaison service (PALS)

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern please contact our PALS team on 020 7288 5551 or [whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net)

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet please email [whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net](mailto:whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net). We will try our best to meet your needs.

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