



Breathing techniques to help with breathlessness

Information for patients from Respiratory Medicine

Information adapted with kind permission from the
Cambridge Breathlessness Intervention Service

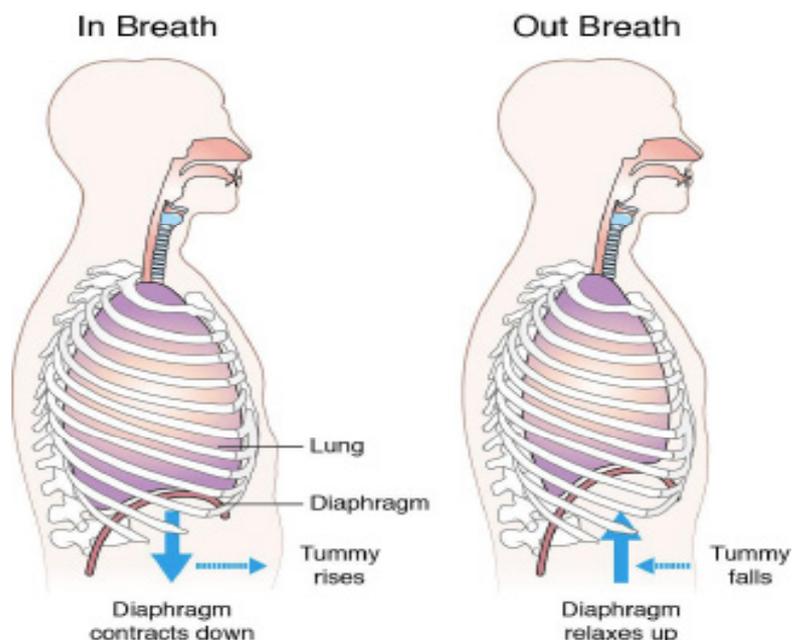
This leaflet is designed to help you manage your stable long-term breathlessness. **If your breathing is getting worse, or you are experiencing breathlessness as a new feeling, you must speak with your GP.**

What muscles do we use to breathe?

- **The diaphragm**

The main muscle used for breathing is the diaphragm. This is a large flat sheet of muscle covering the bottom of your rib cage. As you breathe in, it moves down to help draw the air into your lungs, and your tummy rises. When you breathe out, it relaxes, returning to its natural dome shape, and allowing your tummy to rest.

The diaphragm muscle does not tire easily.



• Breathing accessory muscles

There are many muscles around your neck, upper chest, and shoulders whose role it is to move your neck and arms. However, when you are breathless you may use these muscles to help with your breathing. These muscles are called your breathing accessory muscles.

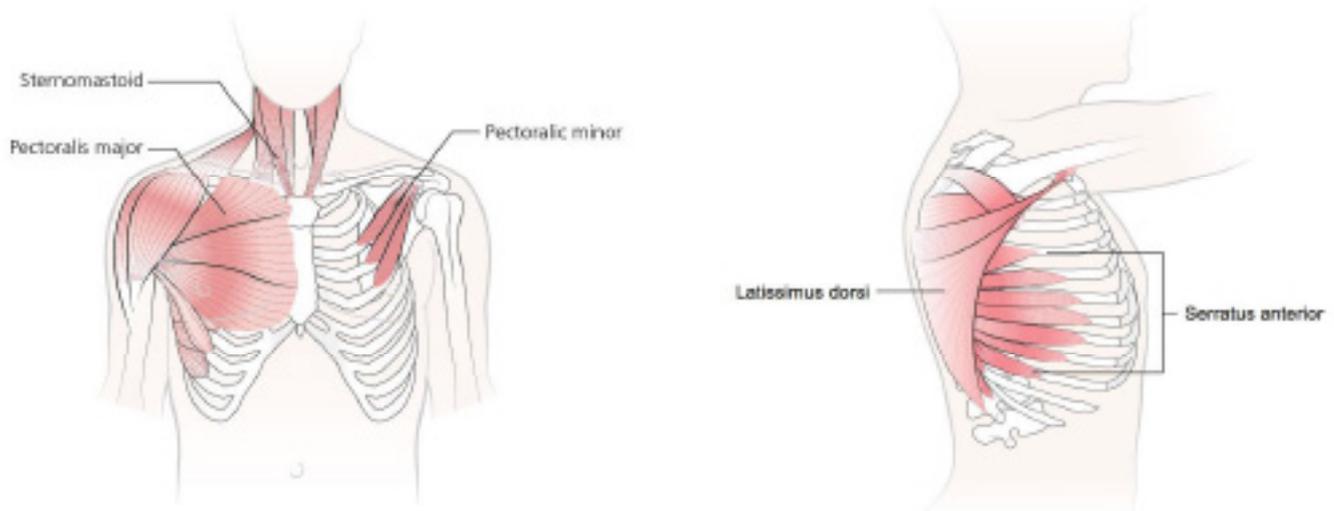


Diagram showing the breathing accessory muscles

It is normal to use these muscles for short periods of time when you are very breathless, however; they are not meant to help with breathing for long periods. They need extra energy and effort to use, and tire out far quicker than your diaphragm.

When used unnecessarily, these muscles stop working properly and can, unhelpfully, focus all your breathing to your upper chest. If this happens for long periods of time, these muscles can become tight, stiff, and sore.

It is normal to use your breathing accessory muscles when breathless, but also important to relax and 'switch them off' once your breathlessness has passed. Try to focus your breathing movement on your tummy (diaphragm) as much as possible and keep your breathing accessory muscles in 'reserve'. The following techniques can help with this.

What breathing techniques can I use?

• Relaxed tummy breathing

When should I to use this?

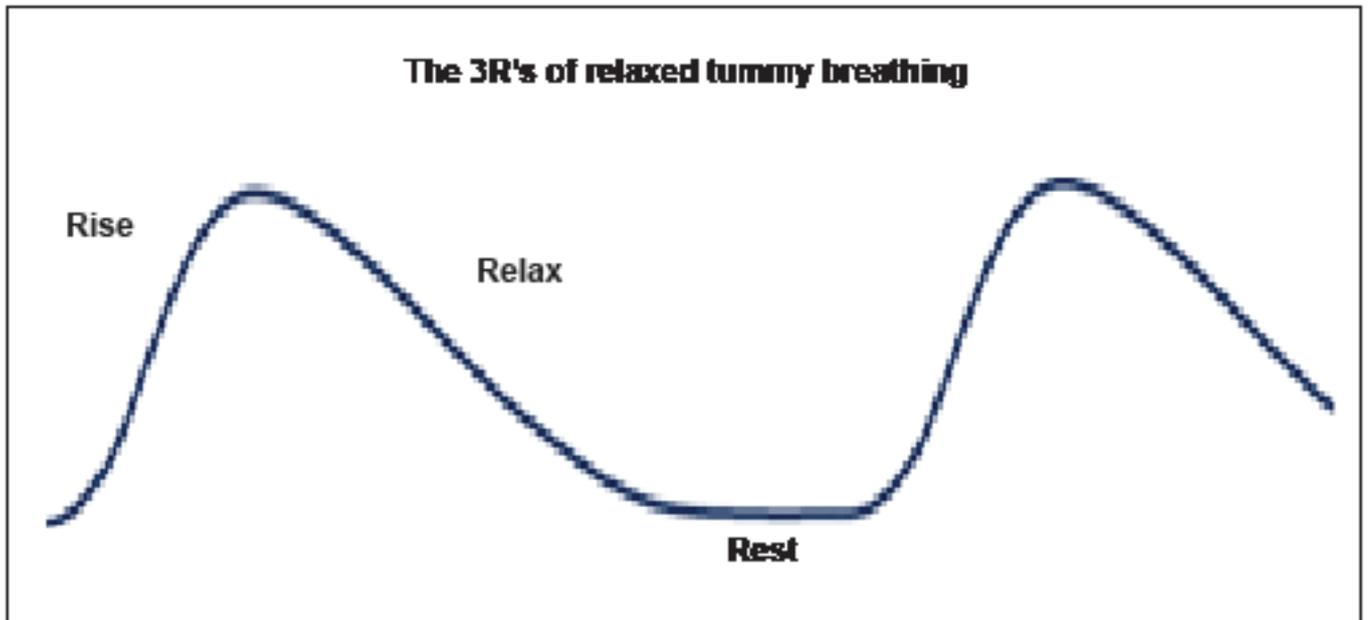
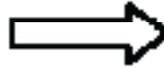
Relaxed tummy breathing may help you recover quicker from breathlessness after you have completed an activity such as walking or housework. It may also help your breathing to calm if you feel panicky. You may wish to use this breathing method with the hand-held fan (see separate leaflet **Hand-held fan**) and a position to help with breathlessness (see separate leaflet **Positions to help with breathlessness**).

How does it work?

Relaxed tummy breathing is sometimes known as breathing control and the aim is to move from fast, upper chest breathing to relaxed, slow tummy breathing. This breathing technique helps to make your breathing as efficient as possible by focusing on breathing from your diaphragm, with your upper chest relaxed.

Fast, panicky upper chest breathing

Relaxed tummy breathing



Rise your tummy as you breathe in

Relax your breathe out

Rest and wait for your next breathe to come

And remember to slow down and focus on using your tummy muscles rather than your shoulders when breathing

I'm finding this technique hard, what should I do?

Breathing from your tummy often does not come naturally. You should therefore practise relaxed tummy breathing when you are not breathless for 10 minutes at a time, at least twice a day. This will help you master the technique.

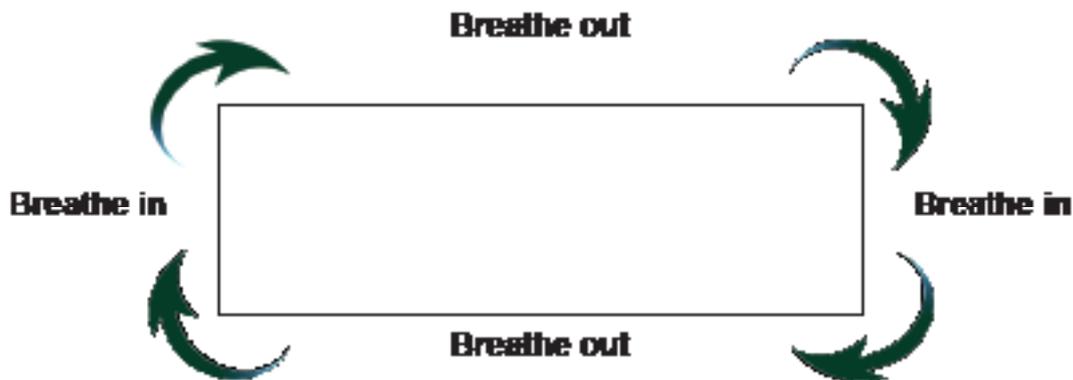
Before practising, make sure you are in a comfortable position, with your head and back supported and your shoulders and upper chest relaxed. Place one hand on your tummy. Feel your tummy rise and expand as you breathe in and relax down as you breathe out. Breathe gently when practising; there should only be a slight movement of your tummy when you are resting.

'Breathe low and slow, relax, let go'

If you usually breathe with small, fast breaths from the top of your chest you may find taking slower, deeper breaths from your tummy helps with your breathlessness.

Breathe a rectangle

When practising relaxed tummy breathing some people like to imagine a wave, as pictured on the previous page. Other people may prefer the image of a rectangle. Wherever you are, there is often a rectangle to be seen, whether this is a book, a TV, computer or tablet screen, a door, window, table top, or even a picture on the wall.



Follow the sides of the rectangle with your eyes as you tummy breathe. Gradually slow the speed at which your eyes move around the edge of the shape to slow your breathing.

• Recovery breathing

When should I use this?

Use recovery breathing when you feel very breathless or panicky and you are unable to use relaxed tummy breathing.

How does it work?

Recovery breathing allows more time for the air to leave your lungs as you breathe out, creating more room for your next breath in. The aim of recovery breathing is to calm your breathing until you can breathe smoothly and quietly from your tummy again. For further information on positions to help with breathlessness see the Trust leaflet **Positions to help with breathlessness**.

The 3Fs of recovery breathing

Fan - use your hand-held fan

Forward - lean forward

Focus on long or relaxed breaths out

People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema, or asthma may prefer long breaths out, perhaps through pursed lips. People with other conditions may find relaxed breaths out suit them better.

- **Pursed lips breathing**

Some people find breathing in through their nose and out through narrowed lips helps with their breathlessness. This technique usually helps people who have conditions such as COPD or emphysema. People who find this technique helpful often use it naturally without realising they are doing it.

Pursed lips breathing helps to support your airways to open, therefore allowing the air to leave your lungs more easily. This creates more room for your next breath in. You can use pursed lips breathing at the same time as relaxed tummy breathing or recovery breathing.

General advice

- Avoid breath holding during activities such as climbing stairs or bending.
- Try to 'blow as you go', which means breathing out on effort, for example blow out when bending, lifting, reaching, or standing up from a chair.
- Try to avoid rushing.
- Try pacing your breathing with your steps for example take a breath in and out on each step when climbing the stairs.

Contacts/further information

You will be shown these breathing techniques in hospital by a member of the respiratory team or a physiotherapist.

If you have any questions or concerns about your breathlessness please speak to your GP, or contact your community respiratory team (if you are already known to them).

Other leaflets produced by the Trust's respiratory medicine team are available from the Trust web site www.ekhufft.nhs.uk/respiratory-lungs-services/patient-leaflets/

This leaflet has been produced with and for patients

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff.

Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 783145 or 01227 864314, or email ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net

Further patient leaflets are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site www.ekhufft.nhs.uk/patientinformation