

# LOUISE MALONE

## **Managing Breathlessness**

Shortness of breath can be caused by many things; disease, treatment, reduced exercise tolerance due to reduced activity levels, and poor posture associated with pain, treatment related fatigue, muscle loss and deconditioning. It can be very limiting in terms of the level of activity that you can do, and interfere with simple tasks such as dressing, walking and doing light activities around the house like cooking and cleaning. Thankfully there are a number of strategies to manage this with posture and breathing the most important ones to focus on first.

## **Posture**

Adjusting your posture is one of most effective ways to manage breathlessness. Someone who is short of breath can often present with rounded shoulders, in a slumped posture with the chin lengthened forward. To reverse this; open the chest by lifting the breastbone a couple of inches, gently squeeze the shoulder blades together a centimetre or two and pull the chin back (like a double chin) to lengthen the back of the neck. Finally, imagine a helium balloon attached to the crown of the head, lifting and lengthening the spine. Do this in sitting first progressing to standing and then walking when it is comfortable to do so.

## **Abdominal breathing**

When we take a relaxed, normal breath we only use about half of our lung capacity. This is good news for those with reduced or limited lung volumes due to disease or surgery. In these cases, one can adjust their breathing pattern to breathe better. In addition, someone who is breathless, is likely to mouth breathe which uses the upper part of our lungs only, further limiting the breath. To address this, we can use the diaphragm (the breathing muscle).

To do this, adjust your posture as above, then gently place your hands on your stomach. As you breathe in; channel the air to the bottom of the lungs, pushing out your stomach as it does so. As you breathe out, your stomach should relax down as the air leaves the lungs. You should feel your hands rise and fall with your stomach as you breathe in and out. It is important not to take a 'deep breath' here, just try breathe normally. Your breath may get a little longer and deeper, which is correct, but it still should be relaxed. As with the posture, do this in sitting first, then progress to standing and walking.

If you are unable to do the above on your own, do get in touch with your nurse or health care practitioner who can guide you through it in person.

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