

# LOUISE MALONE

## **Recovering from breathlessness**

Keeping active after lung surgery or with lung disease can be incredibly challenging. Reduced lung capacity or shortness of breath due to your treatment or diagnosis can make you feel breathless when moving.

The key to moving well is to avoid getting breathless in the first place. We should only move at a pace and in a way that you can breathe comfortably and safely, as once we become breathless, it can take time to get comfortable again. Breathlessness on exertion can even reduce our confidence and/or make you a little anxious about moving again. So, what can we do?

## **Abdominal breathing**

This breathing pattern strengthens the three main muscle groups involved in breathing: the diaphragm, intercostal and abdominal muscles and therefore increases our lung capacity. To practice this, place one hand on your stomach, as you inhale channel the air to the bottom of your lungs and feel your tummy rising. As you exhale, feel the air leave your lungs and your tummy flatten again. If it is available to you, breathe in and out through your nose. Practice this in sitting first and progress to standing and eventually walking when you are able. If/when you get breathless, check your breathing pattern, and try adopting the above if it is different.

## **Slow down**

Slow your movements and your walking pace. This will limit your breathlessness and enable you to do more. I often ask my patients to imagine they are walking through treacle. Your pace is often one of the easiest things to control and can make a significant difference.

## **Pace ourselves**

This is key. Pace your movement and activities during the day. For example, if you get breathless after 4m walking, take a break at 3m. Take a seat, or you can lean up against a wall. Break down a big activity into several smaller tasks and take breaks after each one. For example, if cooking dinner, take a break after preparing the vegetables and ensure you are breathing well before moving onto the next activity.

## **Strengthen our muscles**

Inactivity can cause muscle atrophy (or muscle wastage) and decrease your overall strength, so it feels harder to exercise. Try doing global exercises every day to prevent this. Do ten each of the following: heel raises, seated knee extension with hold, seated glute squeezes, standing wall press ups.

## **Be patient**

Progress may be slow as it takes time to change habits (both breathing and activity) but once you find a routine/system that works for you, stick with it. If you feel you have plateaued, contact your nurse or health care practitioner who can progress and guide you further.

(This article is published in the My Cancer Companion App. My Cancer Companion is a free app providing the best, up-to-date and authoritative information for people with lung cancer and pleural mesothelioma).

Copyright © 2022 Louise Malone

Louise Malone MSc BSc MCSP HCPC  
Consultant Physiotherapist MSK & Oncology Care

42 Harley Street | London | W1G 9PR  
[www.louisemalone.com](http://www.louisemalone.com)