

# Symptom Control Advice

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*Advice for patients about  
breath control, coughing and panic*

**Because every day matters**

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Registered charity no. 297798



**Hospiscare**  
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***These strategies will help you to manage your breathing, control coughing and cope with feelings of panic.***

## **Breathing control**

The following will help you to become more aware of your breathing and to change your breathing pattern to breathe more effectively.

The strategies do not involve you taking deeper breaths but aim to reduce the effort of breathing.

You will find that the more relaxed you are, the more effective your breathing control will be. Relaxation can take time, but you will achieve it with practice.

By mastering the first strategy you will become more aware of your breathing. Then you can move on to strategy 2 which will help you further.

### **Strategy 1: Breathing awareness**

Ensure that you are in a comfortable, well-supported position such as sitting or lying. Try to ensure a quiet environment without interruptions.

Once sitting comfortably, SIGH OUT as you relax your shoulders and arms.

Continue to breathe normally, and when you are ready:

- Place one hand lightly on your upper chest
- Place your other hand on your upper abdomen just below where your ribs divide
- Keeping shoulders and upper chest relaxed, take a normal breath in and feel the hand on your abdomen rise up and out
- Breathe out and feel the hand on your abdomen sink down and in. Your upper hand should barely move. When you feel this happening you are in more control and breathing more effectively
- Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth at a rate that is comfortable to you

Practice this strategy for approximately 5 minutes, two or three times a day, at a time when you feel able to relax.

Once you feel you have mastered this first strategy you can proceed to controlled breathing, strategy 2. This will help you to:

- Sustain breathing control at rest
- Maintain control during activity, eg. walking upstairs
- Regain control during episodes of breathlessness.

## Strategy 2: Controlled breathing

Start with strategy 1.

- Begin to focus on your out breath
- Try to make your out breath last twice as long as your in breath.  
(Sometimes it helps to count – e.g. in for one, out for two, or in for two and out for four.)

Practice until you feel comfortable with this breathing pattern.

***You are now more able to slow and regulate your breathing. You are in control.***

Space for notes you and your nurse might like to make:

# Dry cough

***Coughing can be a distressing symptom if it is persistent, dry or productive. Inflammation, irritation or excessive secretions cause a cough.***

A dry cough does not produce phlegm or sputum. It can be caused by an inflammation, such as post nasal drip or irritants to the airways such as strong smells, cigarette smoke, or even a change in air temperature especially if mouth-breathing.

## Discuss your symptoms

It is important that you discuss any cough symptoms with your doctor or nurse. They may want to examine your mouth or your chest to exclude oral infections such as thrush.

## Strategies that help

- Try to increase your fluid intake – drink plenty of water
- Sucking sweets or lozenges may help
- Drink warm water with honey

Your nurse may advise a morphine-based medicine which your doctor may prescribe.

## Cough suppression

Coughing needs to be suppressed if the cough is dry and irritates the airways, if it brings on a severe fit of coughing, or if it causes distress.

Here are a few suggestions that may help you to stop coughing.

- Swallow regularly
- Take sips of water, lemon juice or cold green grape juice
- Breathe through your nose

- Take repeated short sniffs
- Take slow or shallow breaths if it helps
- Breathe out through pursed lips
- Suck ice pops, lozenges or frozen green grapes (seedless)
- Breathe in steam from hot water – you could add a drop or two of eucalyptus essential oil
- Drink a cup of warm water with honey and lemon
- For a night time cough, avoid lying on your back
- Occasionally one brief dry cough will settle it (like scratching an itch).

## Pelvic floor exercises

Your pelvic floor can be strained by excessive coughing. Each cough is like a bounce on the pelvic floor muscles, which form a sling between the base of the spine and the front of the pelvic girdle. Strengthening your pelvic floor muscles helps prevent leaking and embarrassment.

### *Exercise*

Feet slightly apart, close back passage and tighten front passages, drawing them up inside.

Hold for a count of four. Let go slowly.

Do not hold your breath and avoid tightening your buttocks and tummy muscles.

### *Practice*

Little and often, in different positions, e.g. lying with knees up, sitting, standing. Practice when on the telephone, at the sink, waiting for the kettle to boil, at the bus stop or train station, in the supermarket queue, or even during the adverts on TV. In other words, anywhere, anytime!

# Productive cough

***A productive cough is a wet cough in which phlegm or sputum is coughed up. The secretions that you cough up could be thin, frothy, thick and sticky and may be difficult to clear. The colour will vary from clear/white to yellow/green.***

It is important that you discuss any cough symptoms with your doctor or nurse.

## Strategies that help

- Drink plenty – water preferably, as this will help thin your secretions. Juices and canned drinks are ok, too
- Tea, coffee and cola are less helpful as they have a diuretic effect (make you pass more urine)
- Sipping a hot, steamy lemon drink
- Check that you are in a comfortable sitting position, eg. relaxed sitting, relaxed standing, forward leaning or lying on a bed with your ‘good’ side uppermost.

## Breathing techniques

There are two specific techniques to help with a productive cough.

### ***1) Active cycle of breathing***

- Start by making yourself comfortable in your preferred position. Ensure that you are well supported and your shoulders are relaxed. Have a glass of water nearby
- Take four controlled breaths
- Follow with four gentle deeper breaths by expanding the lower chest and using abdominal breathing if you can
- Take four controlled breaths

- Take four gentle deeper breaths by expanding the lower chest
- Take four controlled breaths
- Do two huffs. A huff is when you take a gentle breath in and blow out quickly by squeezing in your tummy/waist – eg. like trying to mist up a window. Keep your head up whilst doing this to open up your airway
- Relax and rest for a few moments.

Repeat the cycle until you feel improvement.

## *2) Alternative cycle of breathing*

This technique squeezes and stretches your airways so that secretions can be brought up from deep in your lungs with as little effort as possible. Sit or lie comfortably in your preferred position. Have a glass of water nearby.

- Start by blowing your nose and clearing your throat
- Take one, two or three slow breaths like sighs – breathing in through your nose if possible
- Relax for a little while until your breath is back to normal
- Take a very small breath in. Huff out to move secretions but not so hard as to make you wheeze or cough
- Relax for a little while and take a sip of water
- Again, take one, two or three breaths like sighs
- Relax to steady your breathing
- Take a breath in and huff.

Continue the cycle. Take your time – do not rush. As you feel the secretions move up, allow yourself slightly deeper breaths before you huff. When the secretions are high enough you will be able to huff or cough them out.

Try not to cough too early or during the breathing exercise. If you do, take a sip of water, relax and start again.

Use whichever technique works best for you.

Try to practice these exercises at least twice a day, eg. first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

If you are using a nebuliser, these techniques can be used at the same time.

## Managing panic

***There are times when all of us feel sensations of panic. This strategy will help you control feelings of panic and loss of control.***

Sensations of panic might include:

- Tingling sensations in hands
- Lightheadedness
- Fast or difficult breathing
- Palpitations
- Sweats
- Dry mouth
- Feeling out of control and frightened.

The panic hand is a strategy you can use to remind you how to cope when you experience panic or feel out of control.

*The 'panic hand' is adapted from Anon by M. Coultard, Physiotherapist, Dorothy House, Bath.*



# Panic hand

There are five steps (or fingers) to understanding the panic hand.

## **Step 1. Thumb: Recognition**

Recognise your signs of panic EARLY and take the following steps to regain control.

## **Step 2. Index finger: Sigh out**

As you do, relax your shoulders and arms.

## **Step 3. Middle finger: Inhale slowly**

## **Step 4. Fourth finger: Exhale slowly**

## **Step 5. Little finger: Stretch and relax your hand**

Cut out this diagram and keep it in your wallet or purse for reference.



*2. Sigh out*

*3. Inhale slowly*

*4. Exhale slowly*

*1. Recognition*

*5. Stretch and relax hand*



Space for you and your nurse to make notes:

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