



Clydeside Action  
on Asbestos

# Managing Breathlessness

Living with an Asbestos Related Condition.



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[www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk](http://www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk)

# Managing Breathlessness

## Living with an Asbestos Related Condition.

### Introduction

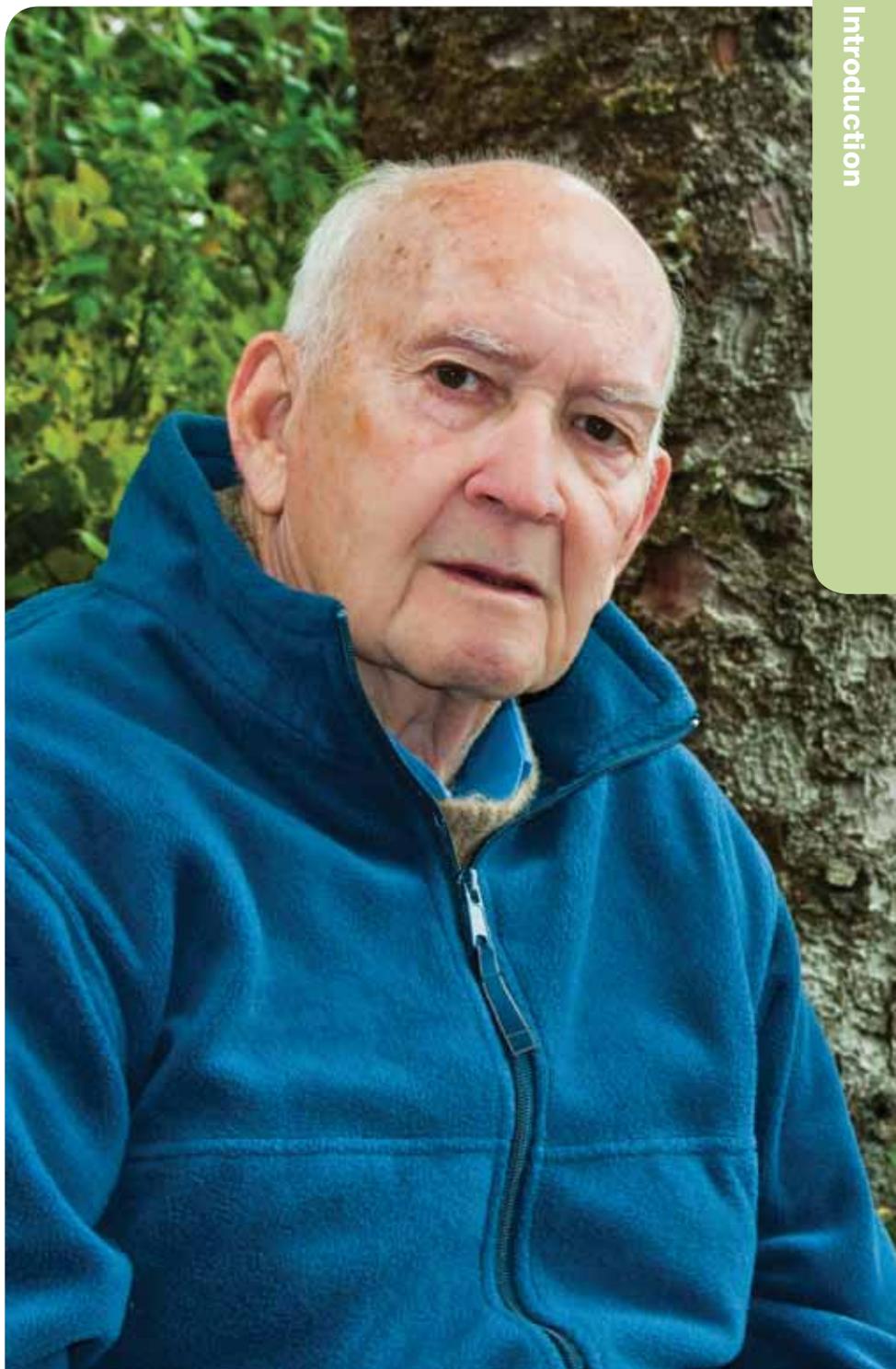
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If you get breathless doing everyday activities such as walking, using stairs or doing housework, there are tips and techniques that you can learn that can help you to manage this.

Making small changes to how you organise your day, or considering if there are any changes you can make to your lifestyle can also be beneficial. You can find out more about this in the **'Managing Everyday Breathlessness'** section of this leaflet.

As well as the level of breathlessness that is normal for you, there may be times when you feel more breathless for a short time. Chest infections, weather conditions and strong scents can all contribute to making breathlessness worse in the short term. The **'Managing Increased Breathlessness'** section can help you to think about whether there is anything you can do to help manage breathlessness if it seems to get worse at certain times.

Anxiety can also cause increased breathlessness in the short term. This is because of the effect anxiety and stress has on your body. By recognising when you feel anxious and taking steps to reduce it, you can help to reduce breathlessness. This is explained in the **'Anxiety, Breathlessness and Fatigue'** section.



## Managing Everyday Breathlessness

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Not everyone with an asbestos related condition will experience breathlessness. However, if you find that you get short of breath when you are doing your usual day to day activities, or when you are exerting yourself, the following information can help you to work out ways to manage your breathlessness.

### Managing Your Health

If you are feeling well, have no symptoms or are coping with any symptoms you do have, consider if there are any changes you can make to your lifestyle to stay well.

Whether it is related to our diet, how active we are, levels of stress or some other factor such as smoking, we are generally aware of the areas in our life that we could work on to improve our health and wellbeing.

If you are a smoker you may not be aware that the combined effects of smoking and asbestos exposure greatly increase your risk of developing lung cancer.

If you would like advice about healthy living or stopping smoking ask your GP or nurse about where to start, or find out what is available in your local community.

### Managing Sudden Change

**If you have a sudden deterioration of new or existing symptoms seek medical advice.**

The symptoms may not be related to your asbestos related condition and it is important that you seek medical advice by contacting your GP, NHS 24 or if you think it is an emergency **dial 999**.

## Managing Breathlessness

**Did you know there are techniques you can learn to help you to manage breathlessness?** Pursed lipped breathing, diaphragmatic breathing or 'tummy' breathing, 'blow as you go' and pacing activities are some techniques that can help to manage breathlessness. There are also ways to stand and sit that can help ease your breathing when you become breathless, known as Positions of Ease. These are best learnt when you are well so you can easily use them when you are more breathless. Ask your GP or nurse for information or see the techniques on Clydeside Action on Asbestos (CAA) self management DVD. You can request a copy by contacting CAA or view it on our website.

**Did you know that you can help manage your symptoms by staying as active as you can?** If you avoid certain activities because you are afraid of becoming breathless, you can quickly become deconditioned or unfit. This can make those activities more difficult when you do have to do them. Rather than avoiding activities, try to pace yourself at a speed that is comfortable for you. To help you stay active, some GP practices link to a local gym or exercise class that can tailor an exercise programme to your needs. There may also be support in your community such as walking groups, leisure classes and groups that promote living well that are tailored to people who have chest or other health conditions.

**Have you heard about Pulmonary Rehabilitation?** Why not ask your nurse or doctor if this may be for you? Pulmonary Rehabilitation can be very helpful for people who have breathlessness that affects their ability to do everyday activities. It combines activities, gentle exercise and education to help you manage your condition. Your GP or consultant would normally consider whether you may benefit from pulmonary rehabilitation in the first instance.

**Have you had a full health check recently?** If there has been a change in your health, a health check can help to identify why. By finding out if the changes are caused by your asbestos related condition or another health condition, the best way to manage your symptoms can be decided.

**Have you contacted CAA to find out more about their services?** CAA host support groups, has information to help you manage your condition and has a welfare rights service to help you with entitlement to benefits and compensation.

## Managing Increased Breathlessness

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If there are times when you feel that you are more breathless than usual, working out why you are more breathless can help you to find ways to manage your symptoms.

### Chest Infections

If you get a distinct increase in your breathlessness which does not settle quickly, feel unwell and are bringing up phlegm which is not normal for you, or your normal phlegm becomes coloured or there is more of it, you may have developed a chest infection.

The treatment for a chest infection is usually antibiotics and the earlier treatment is started the quicker you can usually start to feel better. However, you should always seek advice from your GP or healthcare professional to find out the cause of the change in symptoms, (which may not always be due to a chest infection) and the best way to manage or treat them.

You can reduce your risk of an infection by:

- Keeping your chest clear if you usually have a cough with phlegm.
- Taking regular exercise and being active.
- Eating a healthy varied diet and watching your weight (extra weight creates extra work for your lungs and muscles which increases breathlessness).
- Drinking plenty of fluids.
- Stopping smoking.
- Taking any medication you have been given and follow your GP's instructions.
- Making sure that your vaccinations are up to date. Have you had the annual flu vaccination, and have you had a pneumonia vaccine?

Chest infections are more likely to occur in the winter months so it is important to take most care then.

## Chest Clearance Techniques

It is not unusual to bring up phlegm if you have certain chest conditions or a chest infection. If you find that you need to clear your chest of phlegm and find it difficult to bring it up, you could benefit from chest clearance techniques.

One of the techniques is commonly known as the Active Cycle of Breathing. Your GP can ask your local respiratory physiotherapist to help you with this.

The Active Cycle of Breathing is also explained in our self-management film which can be viewed on our website or obtained by contacting CAA.

## Common Environmental Factors

Some people find that they are more breathless if they go outdoors when it is windy, when it is cold or when it is hot and humid. If you cannot avoid going out when you think the weather will affect you, think about what you can do to lessen the effects.

When it is cold and damp, wrapping a scarf around your mouth and nose so that the air you breathe is warmer can help. On warm days, some people benefit from slowing their pace down, taking plenty of rests and taking along something to drink. Cool and moving air from a hand held fan can also help reduce the sensation of breathlessness.

When indoors, scents such as perfumes, air fresheners, scented candles, aerosols and strong cleaning products can make some people feel more breathless. If you feel more breathless around strong smells, try to avoid being in places where you come into contact with them. If you do feel breathless indoors, cool and moving air from a house fan can help to reduce the feeling of breathlessness.

### Planning, Pacing and Prioritising

If you notice that you are sometimes more breathless than is usual doing your daily activities, such as shopping and housework, think about what you were doing on the days where you felt more breathless.

- Were you rushing to complete tasks or activities?
- Were you doing too much in one day?
- Did you allow enough time to get to where you want to be?
- Did you try to keep up with others?

Plan your activities in advance and allow enough time to do them at your own pace.

### Sudden Worsening of Breathlessness

It is important to distinguish between your normal level of breathlessness and a sudden worsening of symptoms. Whilst being breathless is not dangerous in itself, do not risk becoming distressed and upset by your breathlessness.

If there is a sudden significant deterioration in your condition you should seek advice from your GP, NHS 24 or from emergency services.



## Anxiety, Breathlessness and Fatigue

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Anxiety, breathlessness and fatigue are very closely linked, as they are all associated with tension carried within the body.

Learning a simple technique to help manage this body tension, plus a simple exercise programme can help to reduce the effects of these symptoms and help you to manage your condition.

### Awareness of body tension in anxiety, breathlessness and fatigue management

If we are anxious our body becomes tense. This tension within the muscles makes them work harder, demanding more oxygen, therefore we can become breathless.

The place in our bodies where we usually first feel this tension is in the neck muscles. These muscles ache and we carry our shoulders in a hunched position.

When these muscles are tense other muscles quickly follow and before long our whole body can be involved. This not only leads to an increase in breathing but also a feeling of fatigue.

As the symptoms of breathlessness and fatigue increase we become more worried, leading to more breathlessness and fatigue, creating a vicious circle.

In order to break the cycle we must learn to recognise this tension and “let it go”.

### Simple Technique

Ask yourself “where are my shoulders, are they hunched?” and then tell yourself to “let it go”, by simply allowing them to slump down.

Do not be concerned that this will hinder your breathing because as the muscles relax they will use less oxygen, slowing it down.

As the shoulder muscles relax so will others and it helps to think about “letting go” throughout your whole body.

This simple technique will raise your awareness of where you carry tension within your body and give you some control over symptoms. It can be practised regularly throughout the day.

An important time to use this technique is prior to movement. At this time you may anticipate that your breathing and fatigue will increase with activity, possibly based on recent experience.

This thought in itself is enough to increase your worry and so make you become tired and breathless, even before moving. During movement continue to ask yourself the question and “let go.”

### **Regular exercise—what happens when exercise is avoided?**

All of these symptoms can cause you to avoid exercise for a long period of time. Your suppleness, strength and stamina will suffer. This can make everyday activities like climbing stairs and walking to the shops more difficult.

### **Why does this happen?**

Your joints are made of bones and soft tissues (tendons, ligaments and muscles). Normal movement and activity ensures that the soft tissues work well and remain healthy. Avoiding movement can cause stiffness, weakness, lack of energy and joint pain.

### **What type of exercise will help?**

Depending on how you are feeling you may start exercising in bed, progress to sitting, onto exercises in standing and then possibly a walking programme. Housework, climbing stairs and gardening are good forms of exercise.

### Simple exercising in lying

- Wriggling toes.
- Circling ankles.
- Alternate leg raising (keeping knee straight).
- Alternate raising arms above head.

### Simple exercising in sitting

- Shrug shoulders.
- Circling shoulders.
- Alternate arm raising.
- Straighten knee (hold for 5 seconds then bend again).
- Lift alternate knee up to chest then down.

### Simple exercises in standing – (first 3 done holding onto a worktop)

- Up unto tiptoes and down.
- Slightly bend knees-hold and then straighten up.
- Step out to side and back.
- Stand up from a chair then sit back down.

Each exercise should be done 8 times, 3 times per day. As the exercise gets easier increase the sets of 8.



### Do not exercise if you experience any of the following:-

- Chest pain.
- Leg cramps/pain.
- Blurred vision/dizziness.
- Nausea/sick.
- Irregular pulse.
- Unusual muscle weakness/fatigue.
- Vomiting in last 24hrs.
- Low blood count.

### Before undertaking any of the exercises please consult your GP for approval.

Learning breathing techniques, staying active, controlling your environment and managing anxiety can all help you to manage your condition.

However, if you are having difficulty managing your daily routine or managing any symptoms, speak to your GP or nurse for health advice.

Further information about our services can be found at:

**[www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk](http://www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk)**

Contact us

Freephone: **0800 089 1717**

Email: **[admin@clydesideaction.co.uk](mailto:admin@clydesideaction.co.uk)**

Our support group members who experienced breathlessness discussed the different situations where they became breathless. Walking or exerting themselves, doing too much too quickly, going out in bad weather, strong scents and feeling anxious all contributed to how they felt. For them, it was important to work out when they became breathless and if anything made it worse. They could then learn ways to manage it. As one member said 'It's about working out what is right for you'.

CAA would like to thank the healthcare professionals who contributed to this leaflet.

The information in this leaflet is not intended to be medical advice, a replacement for medical advice or an instructional manual. Any information contained within is for information purposes only and are undertaken at your own risk without any liability to Clydeside Action on Asbestos.

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