Breathlessness

Information for people with a life-limiting illness.

What is breathlessness?
Breathlessness, or shortness of breath, is a complex symptom. Experiencing breathlessness is both distressing and exhausting, and often results in significant anxiety. Many people experience breathlessness towards the end of life. There are intervention strategies that can assist you in managing and living with breathlessness.

Can my treating team help?
It is important you speak with your treating health care team about your breathlessness and the treatments available for you. Both your medical team and allied health team can offer strategies to help manage your breathlessness. Optimal management of breathlessness consists of both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions.

Why is it happening to me?
Difficulty breathing and shortness of breath can occur for many reasons. It is important you talk to your treating health care team about your own breathlessness and the interventions available.

What can I do?
In conjunction with medical treatment for management of breathlessness, there are other strategies that may help you to manage and live with breathlessness.

These include:
- A fan – Studies have shown that using a handheld fan and directing air at the nose and mouth can help breathlessness. Keeping a fan close by and using it when feeling breathless can help you stay in control.
- Self-management techniques – fear and anxiety can increase breathlessness. Practising self-management techniques such as relaxation exercises, mindfulness, meditation and breathing exercises can assist in reducing the anxiety experienced when breathless.
- Breathing techniques and exercises – learn breathing exercises and techniques to help manage your breathlessness.
- Positioning – learn about specific positions which can help when experiencing breathlessness. For example, you may find placing a pillow on a table in front of you and leaning forward with your arms folded over the pillow can help your breathlessness.
- Conserving energy – look at ways to conserve your energy, such as pacing yourself in activities and not doing tasks too quickly. Save your energy for the things you really enjoy. Use a wheelchair for outings to conserve energy. Rollator frames are great for preserving oxygen consumption and can improve distances walked.

These interventions should be tailored to you and your situation.

References: