



Talking PF

An Introduction to Breathlessness Management

Breathing easier with ILD (Interstitial Lung Disease): Practical Tips for Managing Breathlessness

Natalie Waterman, Respiratory Physiotherapist, Medway NHS Foundation Trust

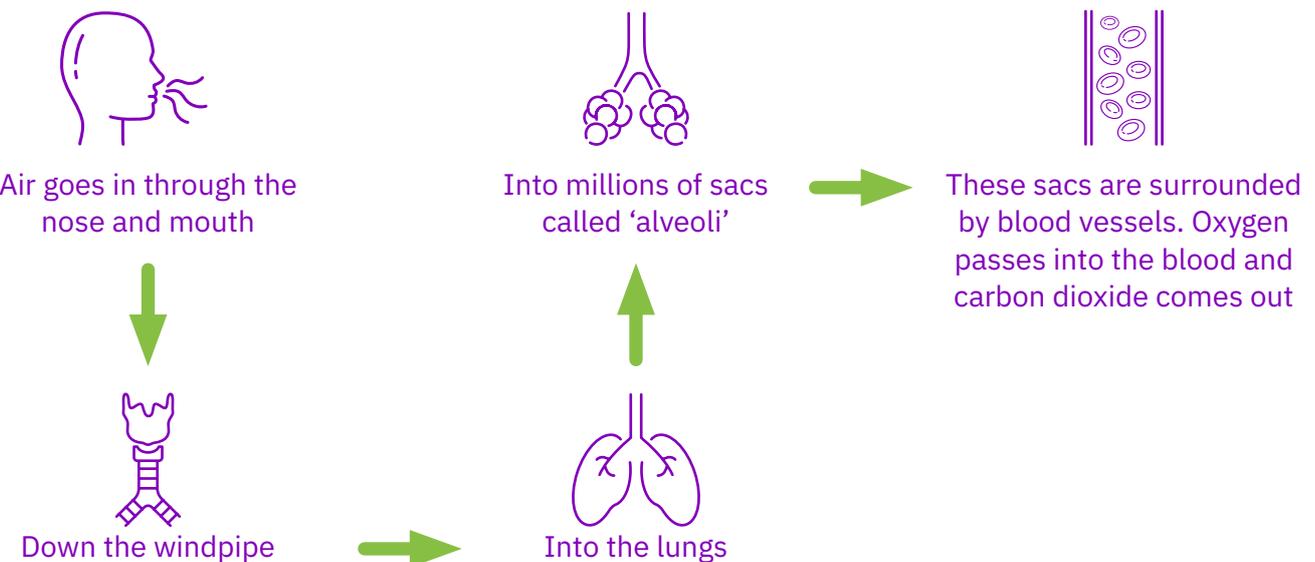
This is a summary of Natalie's talk from our Talking PF: An Introduction to Breathlessness Management webinar in January 2026. During the webinar, Jo Dallas (Senior ILD Nurse Specialist) talked about what breathlessness is; Martyn (living with pulmonary fibrosis) shared his experience and what he does to manage his breathlessness; and Natalie Waterman (Respiratory Physiotherapist) shared some techniques that might help you manage your breathlessness.

If you have questions or would like to speak to a member of our team, our Support Line is open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, on **01223 785 725**.

Our webinars provide general information. We cannot provide medical advice or treatment, or prescriptions relating to any specific case – support with these matters will need to be provided by your existing healthcare professional teams.

Normal breathing

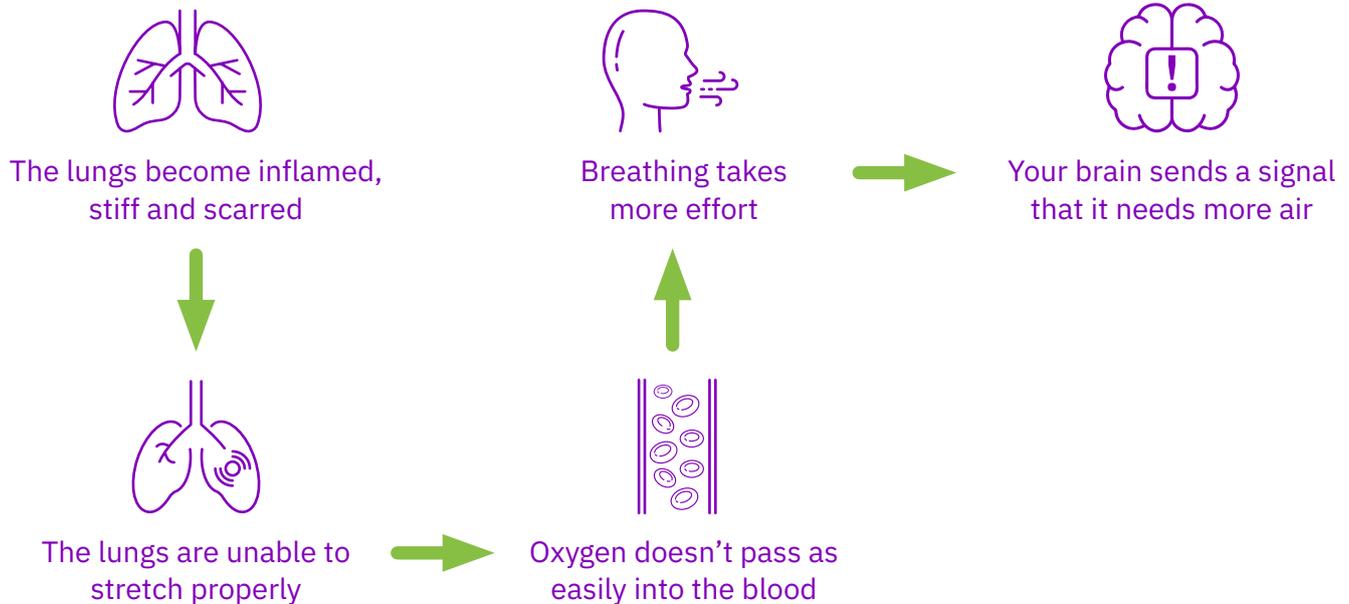
When we breathe in:





What happens in ILD?

When we breathe in:



This feeling of needing more air is called **breathlessness**. This can feel scary as your body can switch to danger mode:

- Your breathing becomes faster.
- Your chest and neck muscles tighten.
- Your heart beats faster.
- Your body releases stress hormones (adrenaline).

What can I do to help?

Breathlessness affects people in different ways. It might be useful to sit down and work out what things 'trigger' your breathing, so you can then work out which techniques might help.

1. Fan therapy

A small handheld fan or cool air on the face can reduce breathlessness.

Hold the fan about 6" away from your face, aimed at your cheeks, nose and mouth for 4-5 minutes.

2. Breathing control

Breathing techniques can help you regain a sense of control and breathe more efficiently.

1. Find a comfortable position and focus or close your eyes.
2. Gently inhale through your nose.
3. Gently exhale, making the out-breath last longer.
4. Feel your tummy gently rise and fall as you're breathing.
5. Relax your jaw, neck and shoulders.





What can I do to help? (continued)

3. Pacing/energy conservation

Think of pacing as an investment of your time – if you pace yourself, you may not need as long to recover your breath.

- Use a wheeled walking frame or a wheeled kitchen trolley.
- Sit when doing tasks if possible.
- ‘Blow as you go’.
- Slide things rather than lifting.
- Break activities into smaller tasks.
- Put items you use a lot in easy-to-reach places.

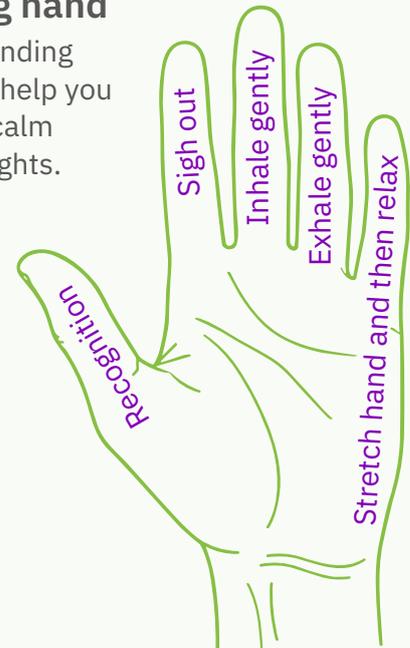
4. Positioning

Use positions to aid recovery.

- Check your shoulder and neck position.
- Gently drop your shoulders.
- Let your hands go floppy.
- Gently shake your arms and soften your jaw and lips to release any tension.
- With each breath, imagine your body becoming softer and calmer.

5. Calming hand

Use this grounding technique to help you refocus and calm anxious thoughts.



6. Other tips

- Distraction techniques – puzzles, reading, focusing on things you love.
- Positive self talk – “I have had this feeling before, I know it will go away, I can do this”.
- Visualisation – imagine yourself elsewhere, picture the colours, light, sounds and smells.
- Keep cool – aim for light clothing, cool drinks, cool rooms (18 degrees).





The deconditioning cycle



Breathlessness can cause you to want to do less activity to avoid feeling breathless,



but this can weaken your muscles, meaning you need more oxygen for the same task...



.. causing you to feel even more breathless.

Remember that feeling a little breathless during activity is not harmful, it's a sign you're exercising and using your muscles, keeping them strong.

It's important to learn how much breathlessness is 'safe' and how to recover from it:



Don't push yourself until you feel exhausted.



Work to a point when you feel mild to moderately breathless, can still speak in short sentences and recover in a few minutes.



You should not feel dizzy, light chested or panicked.

Key takeaways:

- Even when ILD can't be reversed, breathlessness can be improved.
- The way you move, breathe and live makes a real difference.
- Stay active, breathe well and don't fear some breathlessness – it's part of staying strong!

