



# Sex and breathlessness

Living with a lung condition that leaves you short of breath can get in the way of sex and relationships. Sex is important – it's a human need like eating, exercising and sleeping. So this information aims to make things easier for you and your partner to enjoy your love life.

Sex is an important part of life for many people, and this doesn't have to change because you or your partner has a lung condition.

You're not alone: people often worry about whether sex will make them short of breath, or tired, or if it will make their symptoms worse. **Just like any other physical activity, sex can make you get out of breath.** Don't worry: use your usual breathing control techniques, and your breathing will return to normal.  
**[blf.org.uk/support-for-you/exercise/getting-breathless](http://blf.org.uk/support-for-you/exercise/getting-breathless)**

Talk to your partner about your concerns and wishes – and theirs. If you talk frankly, you'll both be more relaxed and come up with ways to enjoy being together and intimate. Remember you can get advice from your health care professional. You can also call our friendly helpline team.

## Here's our suggestions:

### Get fit

Pulmonary rehabilitation and exercise can help you be active for longer, whether you're walking, dancing, having sex or doing any other physical activity.

Sexual activity, including intercourse, oral sex and masturbation, requires energy. As with all physical activity, you'll use your heart, lungs and muscles. You might need to breathe more frequently, and your heart rate and blood pressure might go up for a short time. This is the same for everyone. They return to normal levels quickly, so don't worry if this happens. The energy you use during orgasm is similar to the energy needed to climb stairs or take a brisk walk.

And remember – there's lots of less physically demanding ways to be intimate with your partner like hugging and touching.

Remember that some changes in your sex life are just part of getting older and not because of your lung condition. Slower erections and delayed orgasms are normal as you get older.

## Pick a good time

Have sex when you're rested and your breathing feels comfortable. This is likely to be when your medication is most effective and your energy levels are highest. If you're feeling stressed or tired, having sex could intensify these feelings.

Plan ahead if you can – but don't change your habits if this stresses you or your partner. Make sure you're comfortable and relaxed:

- avoid being where you're too cold or too hot
- wait for two hours after a heavy meal – your breathing might be more strained if you have a full stomach and feel bloated
- avoid alcohol. Drinking can decrease your sexual function and make it more difficult for men to get an erection

## Pick a good place

You'll know that sometimes the environment can affect your breathing, so try to avoid things that can trigger shortness of breath. You might want to avoid dust, house mites, pet dander, smoke or heavy fragrances, for example. Have a look at our information about air quality indoors to find out more.

**[blf.org.uk/indoor-air-pollution](http://blf.org.uk/indoor-air-pollution)**

## Have your symptoms under control

You might want to try clearing your chest before you have sex, or avoid having sex in the morning when many people cough up more phlegm.

If you use an inhaler to open up your airways, called a bronchodilator, try taking one or two puffs before starting sexual activity as this may relieve shortness of breath and wheezing during sex. Keep it to hand in case you need to use it again.

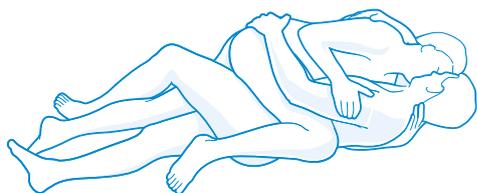
## Experiment

Intimacy is a source of pleasure and relaxation. Sex is also about enjoyment and fun, so having a sense of humour and being able to laugh with your partner will help. It's important to talk about any difficulties either you or your partner have. Be prepared to try different ways to express your affection, and tell each other what feels good!

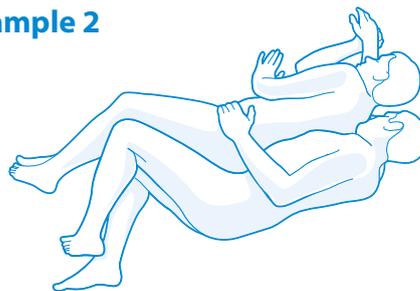
Try different positions to find which ones work best for you both. The key is to avoid positions that put pressure on the chest. You could also try using pillows to maximise your comfort. Positions that use less energy to maintain may be also more comfortable. On the next page are our suggestions for both heterosexual and same-sex couples:

Try both partners lying on their sides, either facing each other or with one partner behind the other.

**example 1**



**example 2**



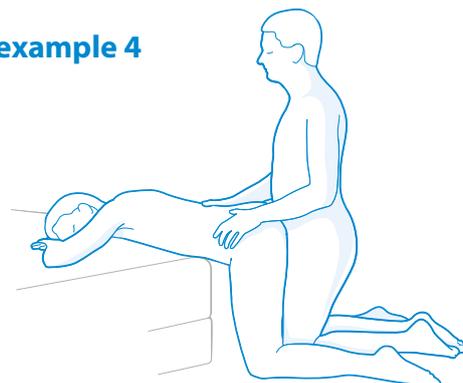
If you prefer one partner being on top, it might be better for the partner who has a lung condition to take the lower position, as it tends to require less activity. It's important that the person on top doesn't press down on their partner's chest.

**example 3**



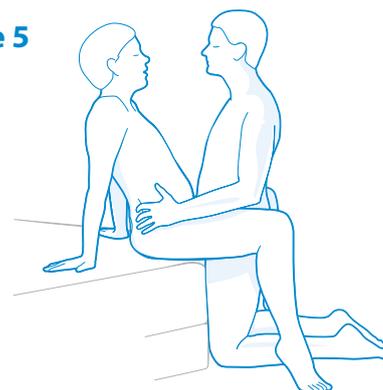
You could try one partner kneeling on the floor, bending over with their chest resting on the bed.

**example 4**



One partner sitting on the edge of the bed with their feet on the floor, with the other kneeling on the floor in front, might be comfortable.

**example 5**



Holding each other, hugging, kissing and caressing are also fulfilling expressions of love and affection, and require less energy.

**example 6**



## Take a break

If you start to feel breathless, try slowing down or taking a rest. Stop to use your reliever inhaler if you need to. You could try to build in frequent rests, changing positions or taking turns with sexual activity. And there's no need to stop giving or getting hugs during the lull.

If you get very short of breath, try to pause and take some slow, deep breaths. Your health care professional can tell you about breathing techniques to manage your breathlessness. These will often have also help you relax.

## Will my medications affect my sex life?

Some medications can cause a decline in your sex drive or sexual function. These include antidepressants. If this is a problem for you, ask your health care professional for advice. Consult your health care professional too if you're thinking of taking Viagra or any other drug to treat erectile dysfunction.

Using a steroid inhaler or taking steroids through a nebuliser can cause oral thrush, a type of infection in the mouth. This might make you feel less inclined to have sex or be intimate. Talk to your health care professional if you get lots of thrush infections.

Some medications, such as antibiotics, might increase the risk of genital thrush. It's important to make sure thrush infections are properly treated, and avoid having sex until the infection has cleared up.

It's perfectly safe to have sex while using oxygen. Some people find that oxygen increases stamina. If you have been prescribed oxygen therapy, you can use it during sexual activity. If you use a different setting of oxygen for activity, make sure to use the oxygen at this level.

### Non-invasive ventilation

People who use non-invasive ventilation (NIV) overnight to help them to breathe often find it affects their sexual activity. But it's perfectly safe to have sex and to be intimate while on NIV. So you can use your ventilator if it suits you and your partner.

## Further information

Getting the information you need when you need it can make all the difference. Our friendly helpline team are dedicated to answering your questions. Call them on **03000 030 555**.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: 03000 030 555

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

Ringing our helpline never costs more than a local call and is usually free, even from a mobile.

[helpline@blf.org.uk](mailto:helpline@blf.org.uk)

[blf.org.uk](http://blf.org.uk)

British Lung Foundation  
73-75 Goswell Road  
London EC1V 7ER

Registered charity in England and Wales (326730), Scotland (038415) and the Isle of Man (1177)



**Code:** FL22

**Version:** 3

**Last medically reviewed:** March 2017

**Due for medical review:** March 2020

We value feedback on our information. To let us know your views, and for the most up to date version of this information and references, call the helpline or visit **blf.org.uk**