



Singing for lung health

Music and other creative activities can make you feel healthier and more positive. There's increasing evidence that singing regularly as part of a group is good for your general health and wellbeing. It seems to be especially good at improving your quality of life if you're living with a lung condition.

How can singing improve my breathing?

Over the last ten years, researchers have looked at how your body and mind respond to music, and have explored ways of using music to help care for health. There's increasing evidence that singing regularly as part of a group is good for your general health and wellbeing.

A growing body of research suggests that group singing is especially good for people living with a long-term lung condition.

Singing can:

- improve health-related quality of life
- be a fun group activity to reduce social isolation and loneliness
- help to improve posture
- increase the strength of your voice

People with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) who join singing groups say singing regularly:

- reduces their feelings of being short of breath
- helps them to feel more in control of their breathing
- helps them to manage their symptoms better

Across the UK there are now singing groups for people with lung conditions. The singing leaders who run these groups have been trained to run singing sessions that are designed to help manage your feelings of breathlessness. Other non-specialist singing groups may also be enjoyable and useful, but may not provide the full range of techniques to help you manage your lung condition better.

Using music

When we sing, you focus on the song's words and melody. When you're lost in the music, you don't consciously think about your breathing. Our singing leaders select songs carefully to support and improve how you breathe.

Why does singing help my breathing?

“After about 10 minutes I’m able to switch my oxygen off because I feel as if I’ve got more control over my breathing.”

Lynne

Many people with lung conditions say that singing helps them to feel less short of breath and more in control of their breathing. There are three main ways that singing can help:

- teaching you to breathe more slowly and deeply
- improving the sense of control over your breathing, reducing anxiety and panic
- improving your posture to help you breathe

“The course has certainly made me more aware of my breathing and how I breathe and how I can improve my breathing ...there is more to singing and breathing than I ever thought possible.”

Margaret.

Breathing more slowly and deeply

In some lung conditions, like COPD, your airways are narrowed or obstructed. This can make it difficult to empty air out of your lungs when you breathe out, and air gets trapped in your lungs. If you don’t empty your lungs effectively, you’ll only be able to ‘top up’ your breath – using the top of your chest to breathe, instead of your whole lungs. This uses muscles in your neck and shoulders which can get tired quickly.

Singing long phrases helps you lengthen your outbreath to empty your lungs. This helps to reduce the amount that you use muscles in your neck and shoulders when you take your next breath in. This saves energy and makes breathing more comfortable.

Strengthening your breathing muscles

Singing for lung health leaders teach techniques to help you use your abdominal muscles effectively when you sing. This can make your breathing at other times more efficient too.

“All the conditioning for your voice and your lungs is separate – suddenly it’s the whole body doing it, and it was like ‘ah, I can use everything!’ The power is not lost just because your lungs are not working properly, you have got power everywhere in your body, so thank you very much.”

Jeannie

How singing can help your symptoms:

Symptom	How the session helps	Benefits
If your voice is breathy, or you're hoarse or your vocal muscles are weaker	Exploring the reasons for the breathy sound. This may be due to poor posture or using either too much or too little air when you sing or speak. This can tire your voice, so you'll learn how to make a safe and stronger sound when you speak or sing	Your vocal strength and stamina will get better and you'll have more control over your speaking voice
You feel out of breath and worry about getting out of breath	Using songs that you enjoy singing with long phrases Exercises that encourage you to take a relaxed breath in with a soft belly, and then a long, slow breath out as you allow the tummy to move inwards Songs that encourage you to breathe out completely then breathe in more effectively	You'll feel more in control of your breathing You'll learn techniques to breathe more efficiently
Coughing when you breathe in and out	Learn techniques such as breathing in through your nose	Less coughing by avoiding triggers such as breathing in cold air through your mouth
Feeling weak and so moving around less	Showing you good positions to sing in Rhythmic movements such as clapping or stepping Incorporating movement with singing and strengthening optimal postures to help you breathe and sing better	Increasing your awareness of your core strength using your whole body to sing to strengthen muscles and improving your mobility

"It's given them much better quality of life, they've improved their lung capacity, some of them don't tend to get any exacerbations [also called flare-ups] of their COPD anymore and they're using their inhalers less."

Linda, COPD clinical nurse specialist

Most of the research that's been done so far has been with people living with COPD. But people living with other lung conditions such as asthma and pulmonary fibrosis may also benefit from joining a singing group.

BLF singing for lung health group leaders aren't necessarily health care professionals. They have all received quality assured training. However, should you have a chest infection or have other concerns about your health it is best to discuss these with your GP.

"For people with lung conditions, the breath is often a barrier to living. When we sing, the breath enables creation of something new, promoting life not inhibiting it. It is the barrier that is forgotten, not the breath."

Ruby, singing leader

How can singing improve your wellbeing?

As well as helping your breathing, regular group singing can have other more general benefits.

Positive feelings

People say singing is uplifting and joyful. They feel positive during the singing session, and the positive mood continues afterwards. Singing can help if you feel depressed, stressed or anxious.

"Once I'm here and we start singing, it just takes all the worries away."

Jill

"A lot of people with lung diseases suffer from depression because there are lots of things we can't do any more that we used to do and enjoy. Coming here's not just good for the physical health but for the mental health."

Elmi

"It's that kind of mental wellbeing aspect and then actually from singing you get that great rush of endorphins and it makes you more alert"

Singing for lung health leader

Confidence building

People living with a long-term lung condition say that group singing makes them think of themselves as choir members, rather than patients. Singing and being part of a group gives you confidence and a sense of achievement. It can motivate you to try other activities.

"The most important thing is improving our health – but we don't sound too bad either!"

John

Feeling part of a group

Regular group singing can make you feel less isolated and is a way of feeling part of a group. You can make new friends. They'll understand your challenges because they face them too. It's also a chance for you to share your own experiences and help others.

"It's getting control of the breathing and finding out more about my body, but also the social aspect, just meeting new people. We have fun."

Lynne

"I've made loads of new friends and I look forward to it every week."

Scilla

New skills

Joining a singing group is a way of learning new skills and maybe reviving existing ones. Learning new songs can help to improve your ability to focus and concentrate and also to stimulate your memory.

What happens in a singing for lung health session?

Singing for lung health sessions will cover a variety of breathing exercises, songs and relaxation techniques.

The sessions are designed to be enjoyable and stimulating, as well as to help with your symptoms.

Warm-up

The session will start with a warm-up to prepare your body for activity and get you ready to sing. This will probably include:

- physical warm-ups
- breathing exercises
- vocal exercises such as rhythm and pitch games

The breathing exercises will help you to control your feelings of breathlessness and coordinate your breath with movement. Warming up also helps to get your voice ready to sing.

"We start with some breathing and singing exercises. Some of these involve making funny faces and funny noises – we always have a good laugh. It's a good icebreaker, especially if you're a nervous first-timer."

John

"Some people in the group have never sung before, but it doesn't really matter... it's the benefits of the breathing exercises that are most important."

Russ

Songs

Your singing for lung health leader will choose songs that are suitable for people with a lung condition, as well as being fun. Some songs will be sung in a call and response format so you can listen and repeat what the leader sings without having to read or think about what's coming next.

"Having a bit of a respite where you enjoy something and you're present in the moment and you are not worrying about what's coming next has a real positive impact."

Singing for lung health leader

Join a group

"Give it a go. You don't have to be a good singer, you just have to want to help try and improve yourself."

Lynne

You don't need any musical ability or experience to join a singing group. Some people are reluctant to give it a go because they feel they can't sing.

But you don't need to be an amazing singer to benefit from learning the breathing exercises, singing in a group, and meeting other people with a lung condition. And you may find that you can sing better than you think!

"Many come along feeling sceptical, not really sure how it will help. And most of them have stuck with it, and now really look forward to coming back and singing with us all."

John

How can I get involved in a BLF singing group?

You can search for a group near you at [blf.org.uk/support-in-your-area](https://www.blf.org.uk/support-in-your-area) or call our helpline on **03000 030 555**, Monday to Friday between 9am and 5pm. The groups listed are either supported by the BLF or independent.

- a BLF-supported group is described as “led by a local singing leader who has taken part in our singing programme”. This means the leader has been trained to lead singing groups for people with lung conditions.
- We list some independent singing groups so as many people as possible can access this type of support. You may find joining an independent singing group or choir fun, but we can’t comment on their ability to improve your health or wellbeing.

How can I become a BLF singing leader?

If you’d like to become a BLF singing leader and set up your own group, please email us at singing@blf.org.uk to find out more.

Get in touch with us to find support near you.

Helpline: 03000 030 555

Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

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

helpline@blf.org.uk

[blf.org.uk](https://www.blf.org.uk)

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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](https://www.blf.org.uk)