

A Guide to Over-Breathing

Also Known as Hyperventilation

WHAT IS OVER-BREATHING?

Exactly as it sounds, over-breathing is breathing more than is necessary to meet the body's natural requirements.

Over-breathing is a perfectly normal reaction to any stressful situation. Generally, when this has passed, breathing will return to a normal rate. Sometimes following a period of prolonged stress or when you experience a physical trigger, a pattern of over-breathing may develop, this pattern does not return to normal, even when the original trigger has resolved.

How do I know if I am over-breathing?

You may not be aware that you are over-breathing but you may be aware of some, or even all, of the following most commonly experienced symptoms:

- Frequent sighing and yawning
- Feeling breathless, even after relatively minor exercise
- Difficulty co-ordinating breathing and talking and/or eating
- Breathless when anxious or upset
- Pins and needles in hands/arms/around mouth
- Palpitations
- Feeling permanently exhausted and unable to concentrate for no apparent reason
- Throat symptoms
- Muscular aches and tension around the neck/shoulders/jaw
- Bloated feeling in the stomach Light headedness

What causes these symptoms?

When we over-breathe we eliminate large quantities of carbon dioxide on every out breath. This causes a chemical imbalance affecting many of the body's systems. The results can be extremely unpleasant and frightening, causing us to become anxious. This can further upset our breathing pattern and a vicious circle develops.

Triggers

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How can I help myself?

Become aware of the way you breathe... and how it may vary in certain situations. By recognising your triggers and any unhelpful habits you may have developed and then trying to regain control of your breathing, by learning to control the rate and depth of your breathing.

Quick tips

- Learn to nose breathe.
- Try to stop yawning and sighing.
- Focus your breathing gently into your abdomen, avoiding excessive upper chest movement.
- Become aware of your posture and learn to recognise areas of tension in your body.
- Exercise... This can be a good way of increasing your general feeling of well-being and self confidence. If exercising is particularly difficult, discuss this with your physiotherapist.
- Diet... Variations in your blood sugar levels can contribute to your symptoms: Avoid large meals, particularly late at night. Eat regularly Take healthy snacks between meals

A physiotherapist can guide you through these stages to break the cycle of symptoms and reduce the associated anxiety. Changing a habit takes a lot of practise and can take months to achieve. It is important to look at all aspects of lifestyle that may be contributing to your over-breathing.

Recommended breathing retraining

- Lie comfortably on your back with a pillow under your head and knees. Place one hand on your stomach, with the other hand relaxed by your side.
- Gently close your mouth, lips together and keep your jaw loose.
- Breathe in gently through your nose, feeling your tummy rise and expand 'like a balloon' as you breathe in. The breath should be unforced and silent.
- Breathe out lightly through your nose if possible, without pushing, keeping your stomach relaxed.
- Make sure you relax and pause at the end of each breath out.
- When you breathe in, your upper chest should be relaxed and not moving. From time to time place your hand on your upper chest to check this.
- As you repeat this sequence be aware of any areas of tension in your body and concentrate on 'letting go', particularly jaw, neck, shoulders and hands.

Quick Summary

Practice as often as you can. Try little and often, e.g. few minutes every hour. Progress to sitting, then standing and then walking. Your body will adapt to this natural way of breathing, you will find it requires less time and energy. Remember, the more time put into practicing, the sooner you will feel back in control

For more information on breathing and videos www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk