

Managing over-breathing (Hyperventilation/dysfunctional breathing)

Introduction

This leaflet has been produced to help you understand more about over-breathing and how you can manage this.

What is over-breathing?

Exactly as it sounds, over-breathing is breathing more than is necessary to meet the body's needs. To over-breathe is a normal reaction to stress. Most people have had some symptoms of over-breathing at some time in their lives, such as a racing heartbeat, 'butterflies' in their tummy, feeling sick (nausea), dry mouth or trembling.

Normally, the symptoms go away when the stress has passed, but some people carry on over-breathing even after the stress has gone. They may still have their symptoms or, if their breathing pattern has already changed, they will react excessively to another source of stress.

What are the symptoms?

You may be aware of some or all of the following commonly experienced symptoms.

- Frequent sighing and yawning
- Feeling breathless, even after minor exercise
- Difficulty co-ordinating breathing and talking and/or eating
- Breathless when anxious or upset
- Pins and needles in your hands/arms/around mouth
- Palpitations (fast heartbeat)
- Feeling exhausted all of the time and being unable to concentrate
- Muscular aches and tension around the neck/shoulders/jaw
- Bloating feeling in the stomach
- Light-headedness.

Reference No.

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Department

Therapy

Review due

February 2021

**Patient
Information**

What are the possible causes?

Chest disease - changes in the breathing pattern can develop over years

Nasal problems - leading to mouth breathing

Personality - perfectionists have a tendency to over-breathe

Hectic lifestyle and stress - which does not go away, is denied or is unnoticed, can lead to symptoms

Full time carers - can put off dealing with problems and end up with health problems and needs of their own.

How do I know if I am over-breathing?

There are typical signs which indicate over-breathing:

- Greater movement of the upper chest than with normal breathing
- Erratic (irregular) breathing pattern
- A mixture of shallow and deep breaths
- Wide variations in rhythm
- Frequent sighs and yawns
- Breath holding
- Noisy breathing
- Breathing rate is often over the average 15 breaths per minute.

How can I help myself?

- To correct your breathing pattern, you need to be aware of the way you breathe and how it changes in certain situations
- Learn to breathe through your nose
- Become aware of the rise and fall of your stomach as you breathe, allowing your stomach to gently rise as you breathe in and fall as you breathe out. The breath should be relaxed and almost silent. Practice your breathing in a relaxed position
- Avoid excessive upper chest movement
- Avoid yawning or sighing

Patient Information

- Relaxation -physical tension encourages upper chest movement so learn to relax your shoulders and chest
- Exercise -this can be a good way of increasing your general feeling of wellbeing and self confidence
- Diet -huge swings in your blood sugar levels can make your symptoms worse. Avoid large meals, particularly late at night. Eat regularly and have healthy snacks between meals. Eating protein regularly is important.

How quickly can I expect to see an improvement?

It takes time and practice to change a habit but it can be done.

If your problems do not improve you may benefit from being referred to a chartered physiotherapist.

Contact information

If you have any questions please contact:

Therapy Department
Cheltenham General Hospital
Tel: 0300 422 3040
Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital
Tel: 0300 422 8527
Monday to Friday, 8:30am to 4:30pm

Further information

British Lung Foundation
Tel: 03000 030 555 (Helpline)
Website: www.lunguk.org

Hyperventilation Syndrome Breathing Pattern Disorders
(Third Revised Edition) by Dinah Bradley.
Published by Kyle Cathie Ltd.
Website: www.physiohypervent.org

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