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Breathing Exercises

When are breathing exercises helpful?

Breathing exercises help you make use of your entire lung and keep your chest muscles active. They allow you to get more oxygen with each breath and to breathe with less effort. They help if you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Breathing exercises also can reduce symptoms caused by anxiety and stress. Anxiety and stress increase the heart and breathing rates, and increase the body's demand for oxygen. Learning to control your breathing rate is a big benefit. Breathing exercises can improve your performance during physical activity, as well.

You may be asked to do breathing exercises before and after abdominal, heart, or lung surgery. The exercises help prevent pneumonia when you are not able to get up and move around easily.

How are breathing exercises done?

The exercises focus on three areas: the upper chest, the lower side ribs, and the diaphragm. The diaphragm is the large flat muscle located between the lungs and the abdomen. It moves when we breathe in (inhaling) and breathe out (exhaling). If you have breathing problems, proper use of the diaphragm is very important when you exhale.

A nurse or therapist can teach you the right way to do the breathing exercises. You will learn to focus on a particular area and not use your neck or shoulder muscles. You can exercise at home. Learning in front of a mirror is useful. You should try to do each exercise recommended by your health care provider 10 times a session, 3 or 4 times a day.

What types of breathing exercises are used?

Three types of exercises are pursed-lip breathing, deep breathing, and diaphragmatic breathing. These breathing methods prevent or reduce trapped air in your lungs, and allow you to inhale more fresh air.

Pursed lip breathing (when you are short of breath)

- Relax your neck and shoulder muscles.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose for 2 or 3 counts (count 1, 2, 3)
- Purse your lips as if you were going to whistle.
- Breathe out gently through pursed lips twice as long as you breathed in. Let the air escape naturally and don't force the air out of your lungs.
- Keep doing pursed lip breathing until you are not short of breath.

Deep breathing

- Sit or stand, pull your elbows back firmly, and inhale deeply.
- Hold your breath for 5 counts.
- Exhale slowly and completely.

Diaphragm breathing

- Lie on your back with your knees bent and supported by pillows.
- Place your fingers on your belly just below your ribcage.
- As you inhale deeply, your belly and lower ribs should rise while your chest remains fairly still. Inhale for a count of 3 and exhale for a count of 6. Slightly puckering your lips can help you exhale slowly.

With practice, you should be able to use diaphragm breathing to take a dozen such breaths without tiring. When you have mastered this, try it standing. Finally, practice it while walking or even climbing stairs. You may also try it with your lips puckered while you inhale.

If you have COPD, ask your health care provider which exercises will work best for you.

What are the benefits if I have COPD?

Many people with COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) find themselves getting less and less exercise. They think that being breathless and tired must mean the activity is harming their lungs and heart and that it is better to be resting. This is not true. If you don't exercise, your muscles weaken and you become less able to do the things you want to do. When you exercise any muscles regularly, they are able to do more work on less oxygen.

It is important to stay as active as you can. By doing these breathing exercises, you will be able to do more before having to stop because you are short of breath.

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