

Breathing Exercises

Here are two main exercises for people with breathing problems, plus a strategy for dealing with a sudden attack of breathlessness.

Pursed-lip breathing:

This helps you control your breathing rate and reduces the work of breathing. It helps keep more air in your lungs. It also helps you relax and feel in control.

1. Relax your shoulders.
 2. Inhale through your nose (if able) for two counts.
 3. Purse your lips as if you were going to whistle or kiss someone.
 4. Breathe out slowly for four counts, while keeping your lips pursed.
- It may help to say to yourself, "In and two; Out and two and three and four."

Practice 4-5 times a day at first.

Then, use pursed-lips breathing during the difficult part of any activity, such as bending, lifting, getting out of a car, or climbing stairs.

Belly breathing:

This helps you get more air. Your diaphragm ("die-a-framm") is a sheet of muscle that holds up your lungs. It sits on top of your stomach and intestines. It goes up and down to make your lungs expand and compress when you breathe in and out. Therefore, expanding your belly, when you take a breath, helps your diaphragm to pull your lungs open wide.

1. Stand up in front of a wall (if able - otherwise, sit down at a table). May put one foot forward for better balance.
2. Lean forward against the wall (or table) with folded arms in front of your face. Rest your forehead on your arms.
3. Breathe into your belly, so that your belly wall moves in and out. (Bracing your arms keeps you from using the chest instead.)
4. Combine with pursed-lip breathing.

Practice 4-5 times a day at first, for just a few minutes at a time.

When you get used to it, try doing it standing up holding onto a counter, then when sitting on the couch or lying in bed. Make sure you are using your belly muscles and not your chest muscles. Use it whenever you are tired or short of breath.

Managing an attack of acute breathlessness:

Your main tools are position, breathing, and relaxing. Other tools: a fan, anti-anxiety medicine.

1. Get into a position that helps your breathing muscles. Sit up, leaning forward, supporting yourself with your hands on a table or your knees. If you are standing and can't sit down, lean against a wall.
2. Start pursed-lip belly breathing ("In & two; Out & two & three & four"), as described above.
3. As you get your breathing under control, consciously relax all the muscles not involved in breathing. Relax your forehead, your shoulders, and your hands.
4. If you need your oxygen, inhaler, wheelchair, or other assistance, quietly ask someone nearby to help you. Continue to relax and belly-breathe.
5. Turn on a fan so it blows gently into your face. (If you are in the car, open the windows.) This can make it feel easier to breathe.
6. Breathlessness can cause panic, which makes it harder to breathe. If you have anti-anxiety or panic-attack medicine prescribed by your doctor, ask someone to bring it to you with a glass of water.

If you feel faint, are turning blue (fingers and lips), have chest pain or one-sided weakness, go to the emergency room!