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Breathing pattern disorder

Physiotherapy Department

Information for Patients

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What is a breathing pattern disorder?

Our breathing pattern is set at birth. We breathe through the nose using the diaphragm. This is a muscle that sits at the base of the chest and separates the belly from the chest. We should keep this pattern at rest and during light activity, throughout the rest of our life.

Sometimes this pattern can be lost because of physical and emotional reasons. These faults can become habits, and the new pattern is then accepted as normal. Anyone can develop a breathing pattern disorder at any age.

What happens in a breathing pattern disorder?

A breathing pattern disorder often causes ‘over breathing.’ This means you are breathing more than your body needs. This used to be called 'dysfunctional breathing' or 'hyperventilation'.

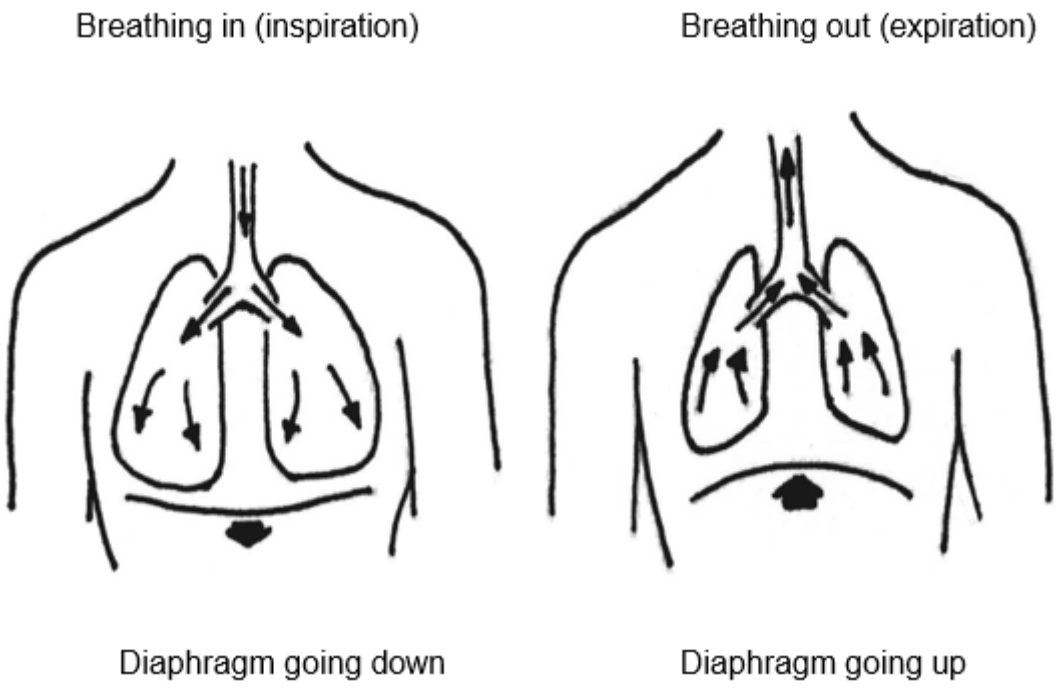
It is hard to accept that we can breathe too much, but over breathing causes stress on the airways and the body.

The body needs a set amount of carbon dioxide to keep it running smoothly. If this level is changed by breathing too much, the levels of carbon dioxide are reduced. This can cause symptoms in different parts of your body. These symptoms include:

- tingling fingers
- dizziness
- palpitations
- chest tightness

What is a good breathing pattern?

When you breathe in through your nose the air is filtered, warmed and humidified so it does not irritate your lungs. The nose also helps control the amount of air you breathe in and out. It encourages a more efficient breathing pattern using your diaphragm (diaphragmatic or tummy breathing).



Good breathing means moving air in and out of the chest with the minimum of effort. Diaphragmatic or tummy breathing is the most energy efficient and relaxed way to breathe.

To see if you are doing this:

1. Make sure you are sitting or lying in a comfortable position.
2. Place 1 hand over the top end of your tummy and 1 hand on your chest.
3. Your hand on your tummy should be rising as you breathe in and falling as your breathe out.
4. The hand on your chest should not be moving much at all.

If you cannot do this, or are not sure, your physiotherapist will help you learn the right way to breathe.

What is a normal breathing pattern?

- **Nose** breathing, both in and out.
- Gentle **tummy** (diaphragmatic) breathing with very little upper chest movement.
- Breathing is **quiet** and with little effort.
- The rate is **rhythmical** with an average of 10 to 15 breaths per minute at rest.
- Depth of breathing should be different during activity and rest.
- The aim of re-training your breathing is to achieve this good breathing pattern at rest and with light activity.

How do I practice a normal breathing pattern?

Follow the tips below for a good breathing pattern:

- Listen to the noise you make as you are breathing. Try to make this noise quiet by making less effort as you breathe. Your breathing should be gentle.
- When you can do this, start breathing through your nose (both in and out). Keeping your breathing quiet and slow.
- Time how long you can nose breathe for. Try to increase this time.
- Try to avoid taking deep recovery breaths to cope with the air hunger.
- When you feel you cannot nose breathe any longer try to go back to quiet breathing through your mouth.
- Progress to practising all of this when you are walking or doing gentle activities.

Use a mirror to watch your own breathing. This will help you to see the pattern of your breathing, to help reduce the amount of upper chest movement.

This will take time but with practise you will start to see symptoms improve as your breathing gets better.

What is air hunger?

When you are learning the new way of breathing, you may have short-term discomfort of air hunger. This is a feeling that you need to breathe more air in. It can show up as an extra deep breath, a sigh or even a yawn. This happens because your body is used to over breathing and does not like the new feeling of breathing at a lower level. With practice and time, your body will be re-tuned into recognising normal as normal. The feelings of air hunger will slowly go down.

To help you cope with air hunger, different methods are available. Your Physiotherapist will help choose the best method for you. Below are some examples:

- Allow a deeper breath than normal and then either:
  - pause a few seconds before breathing out gently.
  - lengthen the time you take to breathe out.
  - pause before you take the next breath in.
- Progress this to allow only a **small** deep breath in when you have air hunger.
- Try swallowing to relieve the need to take in a deep breath.

While breathing should be automatic, in the short term it will be important to think about your breathing. This will help you break bad habits and regain a good breathing pattern.

Remember you can only do this with practice. The time and effort will be worth it.

Further information

Further information about breathing pattern disorder is also available at:
https://www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk/

Your techniques to practice

Contact details

Adult Physiotherapy Department is based at Glenfield Hospital: **0116 258 3595** (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm)

Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice

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