

## Breathing problems and exercise

A little physical activity and some breathing exercises can help a person with lung disease. Be guided by your doctor or health practitioner. Always plan your exercise routine under their supervision.

### How the lungs work

Your lungs absorb oxygen from the air. You breathe with the muscles in your ribcage and a sheet of muscle called the diaphragm, which sits beneath your lungs and above your abdomen. The lungs contain tubes and small air sacs. Each air sac is covered with a mesh of blood vessels called capillaries and oxygen enters the blood via these capillaries. When oxygen levels are too low, the brain sends a signal to the lungs, telling them to work harder.

### Lung diseases

There are many diseases that stop the lungs from working as well as they could. Some of these diseases include:

- Asthma
- Emphysema
- Bronchiectasis
- Chronic bronchitis.

### Breathing is difficult

A person with lung disease has to work harder to get enough oxygen. They often use extra muscles to breathe, such as the muscles of the neck and shoulders. If the lungs are stiff and inflexible, the diaphragm has to work harder too. This is very tiring. Feeling short of breath is one of the most common symptoms of lung disease.

### Breathing exercises

- Improve the strength of the diaphragm
- Get more air into the lungs
- Help bring up deep-seated mucous
- Keep the lungs and chest wall mobile.

### Some examples of breathing exercises

You should consult your doctor or health practitioner before starting any new exercise program.

#### Relaxed deep breathing

Sit down, relax your shoulders, and breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Your abdomen should move in and out while you're breathing. This shows you are using your diaphragm.

#### Prolonged breathing out

Breathe in for two counts and breathe out for three or four counts. This helps to expel any trapped air.

## Physical exercise

You may be avoiding activities that make you feel short of breath. This can reduce your lung function even more. Make sure you talk over the possibilities of an exercise program with your doctor or health practitioner before you start.

Some examples of physical activity include:

- **Walking** - perhaps start off with a few minutes each week and build up slowly.
- **Stretching** - to keep your muscles supple.
- **Weight training** - using small hand-held dumbbells.
- **Tai Chi** - Tai Chi relies on breathing techniques and slow graceful movements which relax and rejuvenate the body, help to boost energy, calm the mind, and improve posture and balance.
- **Hydrotherapy** - exercise done in water.

Don't push yourself. If you start feeling short of breath - stop, sit down and practice your breathing exercises.

## Hospitals provide 'training'

Hospitals with respiratory units often run pulmonary (lungs and airways) rehabilitation courses. The courses may be twice a week for six weeks and they use a holistic approach which may include:

- Monitored use of a treadmill
- Exercise bike
- Tailored exercise routine
- Lectures by a respiratory physician
- Physiotherapy
- Occupational therapy.

You may also be offered advice from a:

- Social worker
- Pharmacist
- An accredited practising dietitian, contact the Dietitians Association of Australia

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your respiratory professional
- Hospitals with respiratory units.

## Things to remember

- Breathing can be much harder for someone with lung disease.
- Breathing exercises and light physical activity can help.
- Always consult your doctor or health practitioner before starting any type of exercise program.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Buteyko Institute of Breathing and Health

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