Breathing problems and exercise

Summary

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

Specific breathing exercises and a little physical activity can help some people with lung disease. It is important that you always plan any exercise routine after consulting your doctor or healthcare professional.

Lung diseases can cause breathing problems

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

- asthma
- emphysema
- bronchiectasis
- chronic bronchitis.

Feeling short of breath is one of the most common symptoms of lung disease and you should speak with your doctor if breathing is difficult.

Muscles involved in breathing

Your body absorbs oxygen and gives off carbon dioxide as air moves in and out of your lungs. The structures that move air in and out of your lungs are the muscles of your ribcage and your diaphragm, a sheet of muscle that sits beneath your lungs and above your abdomen.

Air is carried through your lungs from your mouth all the way down to small structures that are like hollow sacs. Each sac contains a mesh of blood vessels where oxygen can enter the bloodstream. When oxygen levels are too low, the brain sends signals to the muscles that control your breathing so that they will work harder. This means that people with breathing difficulties have to work harder to get enough oxygen.

If the lungs are stiff and not flexible, the diaphragm also has to work harder. In addition to the muscles that directly control breathing, people with breathing problems often use other muscles to breathe, including the muscles of the neck and shoulders. All this effort can make breathing very tiring.

Specific breathing exercises

If you have a lung condition, you should consult your doctor or healthcare professional before starting any new breathing exercises.

Pre-exercise screening is used to identify people with medical conditions that may put them at a higher risk of experiencing a health problem during physical activity. It is a filter or ‘safety net’ to help decide if the potential benefits of exercise outweigh the risks for you. Print a copy of the pre-exercise screening tool and discuss it with your doctor or exercise professional.

The ways that specific breathing exercises can help your condition include:

- improving the strength of your diaphragm
- getting more air into your lungs
- helping to bring up deep-seated mucous

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• keeping the lungs and chest wall mobile.

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 that you are using your diaphragm and that you are breathing deeply.

Prolonged breathing out
Breathe in for two counts and breathe out for three or four counts. This helps to expel any trapped air so there is more room for fresh air when you take your next breath.

Physical exercise to improve breathing
Some people with breathing problems avoid physical activity because it makes them feel short of breath. But avoiding physical activity might reduce your lung function even more.

Make sure you discuss the possibilities of an exercise program with your doctor or healthcare professional before you start any new activities.

Some examples of physical activity that can be useful include:
• Walking – start with a few minutes each week and build up slowly.
• Stretching – keep your muscles supple.
• Weight training – use small hand-held dumbbells.
• Tai chi – practice breathing techniques and slow graceful movements that might help to relax and rejuvenate the body, boost energy, calm the mind and improve posture and balance.
• Hydrotherapy – exercise in warm water.

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

Exercise training for people with breathing problems
Hospitals with respiratory units often run pulmonary (lung and airway) rehabilitation courses. The courses may be twice a week for six weeks and might use a holistic approach that includes:
• monitored use of a treadmill
• use of an exercise bike
• tailored exercise routine
• lectures by a respiratory physician
• physiotherapy
• occupational therapy.

Other healthcare professionals who might offer you advice include:
• social workers
• pharmacists
• dietitians

Where to get help
• Your doctor
• Your respiratory professional
• Hospitals with respiratory units
• Lung Foundation Australia Tel. 1800 654 301
• Dietitians Association of Australia Tel. 1800 812 942
• Physical Activity Australia Tel. (03) 8320 0100

Things to remember
Breathing can be much harder for someone with lung disease. 
Breathing exercises and light physical activity can help with breathing difficulties. 
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:
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