

Breathing Exercises for COPD

When are breathing exercises helpful?

Breathing exercises help keep your chest muscles active. They allow you to get more oxygen with each breath and to breathe with less effort. They may 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 can be very helpful. Breathing exercises can also improve your ability to be physically active.

You may be asked to do breathing exercises before and after some types of surgery. The exercises help prevent pneumonia when you are not able to get up and move around easily.

How are breathing exercises done?

A nurse or therapist can teach you the right way to do the breathing exercises. You can do the exercises at home. Practicing in front of a mirror is useful. You should try to do each exercise recommended by your healthcare provider 10 times a session, 3 or 4 times a day.

What types of breathing exercises are used?

Two types of exercises are pursed-lip breathing and deep breathing. These breathing methods prevent or reduce trapped air in your lungs and allow you to inhale more fresh air. Another exercise called the huff cough technique can help you learn to cough up mucus in a way that doesn't wear you out too much.

Pursed-lip breathing (when you are short of breath)

Follow these steps for pursed-lip breathing:

1. Get in a comfortable position. Try to relax your neck and shoulder muscles.
2. Breathe in slowly through your nose for 2 or 3 counts. Count 1, 2, 3.
3. Purse your lips together like you were going to whistle.
4. Breathe out gently through your pursed lips. Try to breathe out twice as long as you breathed in (4 to 6 counts). Try to keep breathing out until all the air is gone.

Pursed breathing allows you to relax and slow down your breathing. When you breathe fast, there isn't enough time to breathe out fully, so trapped air takes up more and more space in your lungs. With pursed lip breathing, you can get rid of air that is trapped in your lungs. This makes room for more fresh air with oxygen to come into your lungs. Your lungs will work better and you can use less energy to breathe. You will have less shortness of breath and it will be easier to be physically active.

Keep doing pursed-lip breathing until you are not short of breath.

Deep breathing

To practice deep breathing, follow these steps:

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

Huff cough

The huff cough combines breathing techniques with coughing. This helps you cough more effectively without wearing yourself out too much. Sit comfortably in a chair and follow these steps:

1. Take a breath that is a little deeper than normal.
2. Use your stomach muscles to blow the air out in 3 breaths, making a "ha, ha, ha" sound. It is like "huffing" onto a mirror or window to steam it up.

Huff coughs are not as forceful as regular coughs but they can work better and be less tiring.

Ask your healthcare provider which exercises will work best for you.

What are the benefits of breathing exercises 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 hurting their lungs and heart and that it is better to rest. This is not true. Even more important than breathing exercises is walking and other activities that use your legs and other muscle groups. This includes walking on a treadmill, using an indoor bicycle or elliptical machine. If you don't exercise, your muscles weaken and you become less able to do the things you want to do. When you exercise your muscles regularly, they are able to do more work on less oxygen.

Your healthcare provider or physical therapist can give you guidelines on how to get started on an exercise program. And by doing these breathing exercises, you will be able to do more before you are short of breath and have to stop.

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