

NIH Clinical Center Patient Education Materials

Living with dyspnea: How to breathe more easily

What is dyspnea?

Dyspnea (pronounced disp–NEE–uh) is a medical term for difficult or labored breathing. Having dyspnea can be hard to live with. You may get short of breath during daily activities and become anxious when your breathing changes. Medications may help, and, to get the most benefit, you should take them exactly as instructed by your healthcare team.

Experts such as respiratory therapists, physical therapists, respiratory nurses, and pulmonary specialists will work with you to develop ways to help you breathe and manage dyspnea. These methods include pursed-lip breathing, positioning, paced breathing, and desensitization. Pulmonary exercises for dyspnea are specific for each person.

Pursed-lip breathing

This method may seem awkward at first, but it eases labored breathing.

- Breathe in through your mouth or nose.
- Purse your lips together (as if you were whistling). Then, breathe out.
- Try to breathe out until all of the air in your lungs is gone. One way to do this is to take twice as long to breathe out as you do to breathe in. For example, count “one...two” as you breathe in. Purse your lips, then count “one...two... three...four” as you breathe out.

Positioning

When your muscles are relaxed, breathing is easier. Positioning helps when you get short of breath while doing activities, such as climbing stairs.

- Rest against the wall and lean forward with your hands on your thighs. This position relaxes your chest and shoulders, freeing them to help you breathe. Use pursed-lip breathing.
- If you can, sit down with your arms resting on your legs. Continue to do pursed-lip breathing.

If you find it hard to relax your muscles, then ask your nurse to show you other ways to do this. Other body positions may also work for you. Try them until you find the best one.

Paced Breathing

Paced breathing prevents or decreases shortness of breath when you walk or lift light objects. When walking, pace yourself, and move slowly.

For walking:

- Stand still, and breathe in.
- Walk a few steps, and breathe out.
- Rest, and begin again.

For lifting:

- Before lifting take a deep breath. When carrying something, hold it close to your body while walking and

breathing. This saves energy.

Desensitization

Part of living with dyspnea is getting accustomed to it. Desensitization means that you are not so afraid when you are short of breath. These guidelines will help you get “desensitized.”

- Do pursed-lip breathing, positioning, and paced breathing. Breathing with these methods will build your confidence. When shortness of breath occurs, you will be able to deal with it.
- Ask friends and family to understand. Let people around you know when you are short of breath. You do not need to feel embarrassed when you cannot join others in some activities. By doing the methods explained here, you will still be able to do what you always did; you may just need to take a little longer or do them differently.

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