

Patient information

Dysfunctional breathing pattern

What is dysfunctional breathing?

Dysfunctional breathing is a term that relates to a change in your breathing pattern, from an efficient to a less efficient pattern.

It is to do with the mechanics of your breathing and does not always relate to a specific lung condition.

This change can feel sudden or can build up over time; there isn't always an obvious trigger. Some of the common triggers include:

- Anxiety or stress
- Acute illness eg chest infection, pneumonia
- Long term respiratory condition eg COPD, asthma
- Traumatic event – physical or emotional
- Pain – especially in abdomen or lower back
- Digestive issues eg reflux, hiatus hernia

If this change continues, your body can start to get used to this altered inefficient pattern without you even realising.

What is efficient breathing?

- Subconscious and automatic process
- Effortless, relaxed and quiet
- Nose breathing

- Rhythmical, steady pattern (12 - 20 breaths per minute)
- Tummy movement
- Breath in slightly shorter than the breath out
- Able to talk in full sentences

In normal breathing 70 - 80% of the work is done by the diaphragm (the main muscle of breathing which sits under the heart and lungs) and is the most energy-efficient and relaxing way to breathe.

What is inefficient breathing?

- Mouth breathing
- Short, shallow breaths
- Quick and erratic
- Noisy
- Raised shoulders
- Movement at the top of the chest

What are the common symptoms?

- Breathlessness
- Persistent coughing
- Excessive yawning or sighing
- A feeling of not being able to take a deep breath

You may also experience symptoms that do not seem to relate to your breathing including dizziness, poor concentration, pins and needles, bloating, fatigue, and lethargy.

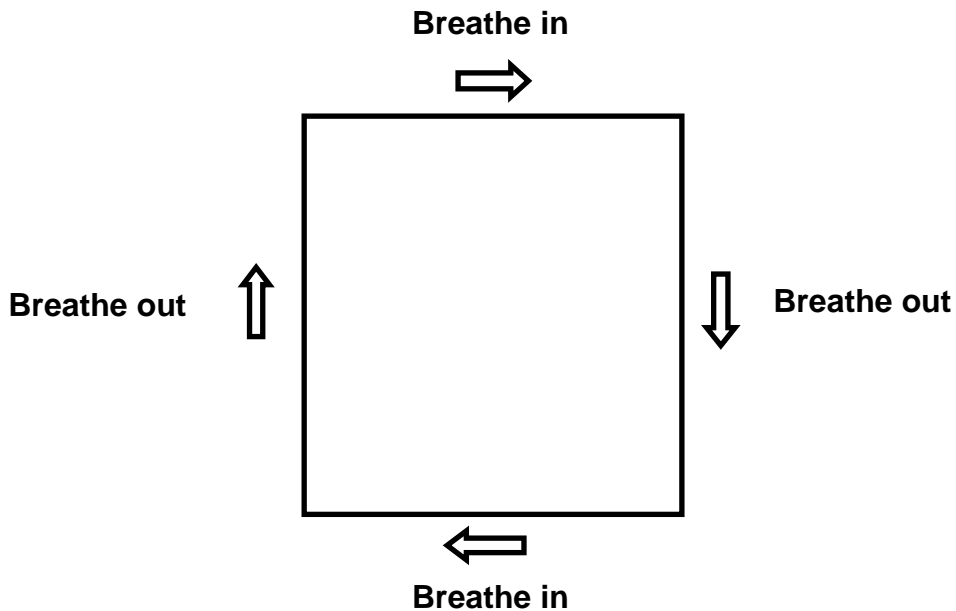
What can you do about it?

- Window breathing
- Breathing control
- Nose breathing
- Understanding your triggers eg managing anxiety, reflux, pain etc.

- Shoulder relaxation / postural correction
- Continue to stay active

You may be referred to a respiratory physiotherapist for further management.

Window breathing



- Place your finger on the 'dot' in the top left of the rectangle.
- As you breathe in, follow the line in the direction of the arrow to the next corner.
- Then breathe out along the next side.
- Continue around the rectangle following the instructions.

This breathing technique is helpful for getting your breathing into a more rhythmical pattern (breath in slightly shorter than your breath out).

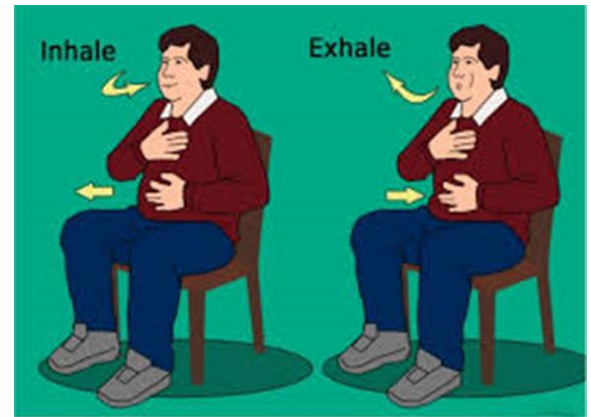
It is also very helpful as a distraction technique for when you have an episode of breathlessness or anxiety.

Breathing control (tummy breathing)

With a 'normal' breathing pattern you should see your tummy rising and falling as you breathe in and out.

Practicing your 'tummy breathing' can help to improve the effectiveness of your breathing and strengthen your diaphragm muscle:

1. Find somewhere comfortable to sit.
2. Either sit in a reclined or upright position - with your back well supported.
3. Place a hand gently on your tummy just beneath your ribs - don't press too hard.
4. Make sure that your breathing is as steady and relaxed as possible - **not deep breaths.**
5. You should feel your hand rise as you breathe in and your hand lower as you breathe out - these are indications that your diaphragm is working properly.



Try and practice this exercise 3 - 4 times per day for 3 - 4 minutes.

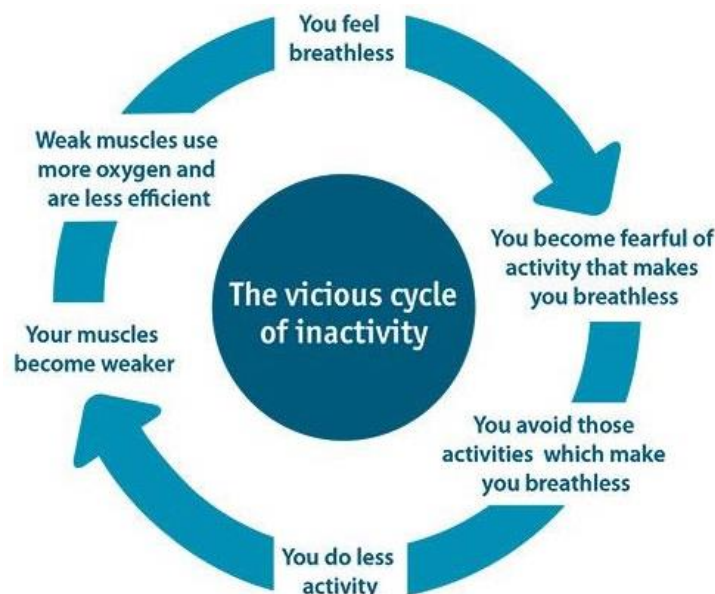
Don't practice this when you are feeling very short of breath as you will find it very difficult.

Importance of staying active

The symptoms associated with dysfunctional breathing can be debilitating both physically and emotionally.

Symptoms such as breathlessness, fatigue and anxiety can lead to inactivity and isolation.

This can lead to a cycle of inactivity:



Being active can help you to:

- Breathe more efficiently
- Improve your fitness levels and your tolerance to exercise
- Improve your mood and emotional well-being
- Improve your overall quality of life

Breathlessness and activity

Breathlessness is a normal part of exerting ourselves. When we become more active, our muscles demand more oxygen from our lungs. This is achieved by:

- Increased breathing rate
- Larger breaths
- Increased accessory muscle work (the muscles in your neck, upper chest and rib cage)
- Increased movement in your upper chest

However, if you are already breathing less efficiently (i.e. from your upper chest), you may already be using some of these mechanisms, and therefore do not have the same reserves to draw upon.

This can lead to feelings of breathlessness that seem excessive for the amount of work you are doing.

It can therefore be difficult to know how hard you should push yourself during physical activity. The BORG Breathlessness Scale is a useful guide (see next page).

You should aim to be working at level 3 - 4

Remember this will be personal to you and may differ from somebody else's idea of level 3 - 4.

BORG Breathlessness Scale

Level	Description
0	Nothing at all (no breathlessness at all)
0.5	Just noticeable (slightly breathless, but I can do this all day)
1	Very slight (still more than comfortable, but breathing a little harder now)
2	Slight (feeling good, getting a little warm, but I can hold a conversation)
3	Moderate (beginning to feel you're working)
4	Somewhat difficult (I'm just above comfortable. A bit puffed/sweaty, but still able to hold a conversation)
5	Difficult (I can still talk, but I am definitely breathless and definitely hot and sweaty)
6	Moderately severe (I can still talk, but I don't really want to. I am feeling very pushed)
7	Severe (very breathless and struggling to keep going)
8	Very severe (I can grunt more than talk. I can't keep up this pace for long)
9	Very, very severe (Struggling to get my breath. Unable to talk. Need to stop soon!)
10	Maximal effort (I can't go any further! Ready to stop/pass out!)

What can physiotherapy do?

- Increasing awareness and education about abnormal breathing patterns
- Reassurance that things can improve

- Learning how to use nose / mouth breathing in rest
- Teaching about pacing / mobilising using nasal breathing
- Breathing retraining in progressively taxing postures
- Education about proper use for medications where applicable
- Education about underlying respiratory diagnoses and how they affect your breathing pattern
- Further recognition of triggers
- Incorporating relaxation methods into everyday life
- Control of symptoms during an episode
- Manual therapy techniques
- Encourage and support you in staying active or increasing activity levels

Resources and contacts

www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk

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