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

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.

![Image of tummy breathing](image)

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.**
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

Resources and contacts

www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk

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