

OVERBREATHING

Overbreathing (medical name 'hyperventilation') means a habit of breathing incorrectly and excessively. It can result from emotional stress and can cause tension or anxiety. Overbreathing upsets the chemistry of the body and can lead to many physical and emotional symptoms. Frequent sighing, yawning or swallowing air can add to the problem.

SYMPTOMS

Dizziness, lightheaded, feeling faint; headaches; tension in your head; being easily tired; ringing in the ears; blurred vision; dry mouth; hard to swallow; sweating; shortness of breath; heart beating faster; palpitations; shaking hands; numbness or tingling of hands, feet or face; aches and pains in your limbs; bloated stomach; nausea; diarrhoea; passing wind up or down; apprehension; tension; agitation.

You can learn better breathing habits which will reduce many of these symptoms. However, it is not always easy to change habits and it may take some time. The actions outlined below have been useful to other people with this problem.

TREATMENT

Step 1 Breathe as slowly as you can using your stomach and not your chest. If possible, breathe only through your nose; in while counting 5 to yourself and then out while counting 5 to yourself

Step 2 Sit or lie in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted and breathe like this for 5 minutes several times a day. Most people find this uncomfortable at first until the body is used to it.

Step 3 When you can do this easily then lengthen the time spent each day. Start to practise slow breathing when sitting quietly, for example watching TV or on a bus. Practice by speaking more slowly or by reading out loud.

Step 4 Eventually you will be able to breathe slowly all the time unless upset or frightened by something. Prepare for such times by breathing slowly beforehand and afterwards.

Interrupted breathing Try taking a breath, then hold your nose with your mouth closed and push your breath as if you are trying to breathe out or are 'popping' your ears. Delaying your breathing in this way will calm your heart and your breathing within a few moments.

Rebreathing If you find it difficult to start the above exercises or if you cannot control your breathing in certain situations, hold a paper bag (big enough for a loaf of bread) over your mouth and nose. Breathe as deeply as you like but only breathe the air inside the bag. You will begin to feel better after a few minutes of this.
(It is not safe to use a plastic bag!)

Sighing, yawning or swallowing air If you become aware of any of these habits try to take a single ordinary breath instead or hold your breath for five seconds.

Relaxation, yoga, tai chi or meditation may also help you to slow your breathing.

(Thanks to Helene Dellucci of Lyon for advice.)

Dr AJ Macdonald - 2010