

## Living with Dyspnea—How to breathe easier

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 your health care team instructs.

Pulmonary exercises for dyspnea should be individualized for each person. Experts such as respiratory therapists, physical therapists, respiratory nurses, and pulmonary specialist physicians work with individual patients with these exercises.

Your respiratory experts may recommend ways to help you breathe and manage dyspnea. These include pursed-lip breathing, positioning, paced breathing, and desensitization.

### Pursed-lip breathing

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

1. Breathe in through your mouth or nose.
2. Purse your lips together (as if you were whistling). Then, breathe out.

Try to breathe out until all the air is gone. One way to do this is to take

twice as long to breathe out as you 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 something, such as climbing stairs.

1. 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.
2. 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, 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.

For walking:

1. Stand still and breathe in.

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2. Walk a few steps and breathe out.
  3. Rest, and begin again.

When walking, pace yourself and move slowly.

For lifting:

1. Hold the object, but do not lift it.  
Breathe in.

2. Lift the object. Breathe out.

If possible, use your breathing muscles for one activity at a time: do not try to move and breathe in, or lift and breathe in. When carrying something, hold it close to your body. 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 techniques 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 need not feel embarrassed because you cannot join others in some activities. By doing the techniques explained here, you will be still be able to do what you always did—you may just take a little longer, or do them differently.

- ▶ Be creative.

If you find a certain activity too difficult, try doing something else that is similar. For example, if gardening is not possible, try growing house plant. It may be just as enjoyable and easier, too.

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