

Could you learn to breathe better?

We all breathe faster when under stress or feeling strong emotion, it's a perfectly normal reaction. Many people experience short periods of acute hyperventilation during stressful events. These episodes are very easy to spot and are often described as panic attacks. Generally, when the event has passed, breathing returns to a normal rate.

In around 10% of people however, breathing increases gradually from its optimum resting level, and they develop a pattern of continual overbreathing. This is known as dysfunctional breathing. It is a much more subtle process than an acute hyperventilation attack, and is much more difficult to recognise. The changes can be caused by a wide variety of factors; pressures of work or personal life, viral illness and coexisting respiratory problems are all common causes.

If you overbreathe consistently, the body chemistry changes, producing a wide range of physical and psychological symptoms that can be baffling. Patients often present having seen a number of medical and other professionals without any specific reason for their symptoms being found. The most common symptoms are fatigue, lack of concentration, headaches and difficulty catching your breath at rest or after minor exercise.

The benefits of correcting a dysfunctional breathing pattern reach wider than simply resolving symptoms. Studies over the last 6 years have shown that a slow controlled breathing rate can synchronise your breathing with your heart and lung system, optimising heart rate, controlling blood pressure, and maximising the amount of oxygen available to your body.

So how do you know if the symptoms you experience are related to your breathing pattern? A specialist physiotherapist will be able to carry out a detailed assessment of your symptoms and your breathing style, and determine whether the way you breathe is having an impact on those symptoms. The physiotherapist can then guide you in retraining your breathing pattern. Initially this can seem awkward; breathing is normally a subconscious activity, and to take active control of it can be difficult. With repeated practice and self-awareness however, a natural relaxed breathing pattern can be relearned. Once this has been achieved at rest, it is important to ensure it carries over into every day activities such as work, exercise and speech.

A useful website for further information and a list of specialist physiotherapists is www.physiohypervent.org,

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