

# Hyperventilation

Information for patients



# HYPERVENTILATION

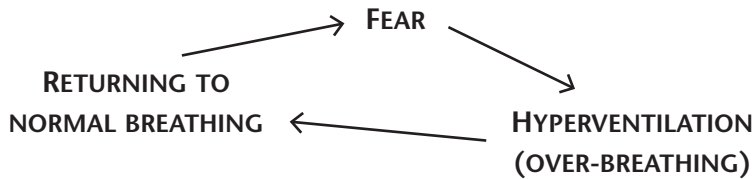
Hyperventilation means breathing in more than your body needs. Another way to describe it is to say 'over-breathing'.

Over-breathing is common during panic attacks. Some over-breathing is part of the body's normal response to threat. It supplies the muscles with more oxygen so that the body is ready to face the threat or to run away. This is known as the 'fight or flight' response.

When you begin to over-breathe, the balance of gases in the lungs is upset. A small amount of carbon dioxide normally stays in the lungs. If you breathe in too much air too often, the carbon dioxide is pushed out. When this happens, it can cause:

- ❖ Difficulty in getting breath
- ❖ Tightness in the chest
- ❖ Very rapid heartbeat
- ❖ Sweating
- ❖ Tingling or numbness
- ❖ Faintness
- ❖ Feeling of unreality
- ❖ Visual problems
- ❖ Rigid muscles, cramps
- ❖ Sudden emotional outburst, for example crying
- ❖ Feeling too hot or too cold

These reactions are caused by too little carbon dioxide. They are very frightening in themselves, and can lead to more over-breathing. This is known as the vicious circle of hyperventilation.



In order to break the vicious circle of hyperventilation and return to normal breathing, it is important to:

- ❖ stop over-breathing
- ❖ make sure there is enough carbon dioxide in the lungs.

### Stopping over-breathing

1. Try to find a quiet place to sit down.
2. Think about the word 'calm'.
3. Try to release some of the tension in your upper body.  
Try loosening your shoulders and sit with a straight back.
4. Now think about your breathing:

STEP 1: breathe out
STEP 2: breathe in slowly to the count of four, 'one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant'
STEP 3: hold your breath for the count of four
STEP 4: breathe out slowly while counting elephants

Repeat the above steps until you begin to feel calm.

Remember, don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe too quickly, or you will become dizzy.

Take a few ordinary breaths in between the deep ones.

### Getting more carbon dioxide into your lungs

The re-breathing technique:

Breathed-out air has more carbon dioxide in it than ordinary air.

If you breathe it in, the carbon dioxide will get back into your lungs more quickly. To do this, follow the steps below:

1. Cup your hands together.
2. Place them over your nose and mouth and keep them there.
3. Breathe in through your nose.
4. Breathe out through your mouth.
5. Breathe your own exhaled air.
6. Throughout the exercise try to stay calm and relaxed.

This should be done slowly and without holding your breath. Repeat no more than four times.

A paper bag works even better than hands; so if you can find one easily, try that (do not use plastic.)

## FURTHER HELP

### Telephone numbers

- ❖ No Panic -  
free Helpline (*daily 10am-10pm*) .....Tel: 0808 808 0545
- ❖ Breathing Space  
free Depression Helpline (*daily 6pm-2am*)...Tel: 0800 83 85 87
- ❖ Depression Alliance.....Tel: 0845 123 23 20
- ❖ Samaritans - confidential support  
for anyone in a crisis 24 hours .....Tel: 08457 90 90 90  
Textphone: .....Tel: 08457 909192
- ❖ SANEline.....Tel: 08457 67 8000
- ❖ Lanarkshire Links.....Tel: (01698) 265 232

### Websites

- ❖ <http://www.lanarkshirementalhealth.org.uk/>  
Lanarkshire Mental Health and Wellbeing Information Site.
- ❖ <http://www.nopanic.org.uk>  
Comprehensive help for panic and associated conditions.  
Includes telephone and written recovery programmes.
- ❖ <http://www.joepanic.com>  
Information and advice on coping skills; introduction to  
cognitive therapy and worksheets that can be downloaded and  
completed; explains importance of good breathing and gives  
exercises to try; comprehensive links and resource pages.

- ❖ <http://www.panic-attacks.co.uk>  
A “panic attack course” that can be completed online or can be emailed to complete in your own time; explains what panic is, why people have panic attacks and how thoughts cause panic; explains how to change the way you think and how to control panic through breathing and relaxation.
- ❖ <http://www.glasgowsteps.com/self-help.jsp>  
Self help booklets on psychological problems, including depression, anxiety, etc
- ❖ <http://www.livinglifetotheull.com>  
A general self help site offering advice on a wide range of issues. It helps you to understand your behaviour and thoughts, and offers help on healthy living, better sleep, relaxation, etc.
- ❖ <http://www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk>  
Offers information and advice to those experiencing troublesome thoughts, feelings and actions.





## TO CUT OUT AND KEEP:

### Coping with Panic

#### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ the feelings are normal bodily reactions;  
they are not harmful
- ❖ do not add frightening thoughts,  
describe what is happening
- ❖ wait for the feelings to pass
- ❖ plan what to do next, then start off slowly

### Controlling your Breathing

#### THINGS TO REMEMBER

- ❖ breathe in slowly to the count of four,  
“one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant”
- ❖ hold your breath for the count of four
- ❖ breathe out slowly while counting elephants

## **Booklets/leaflets available on the following:**

- ❖ Anger
- ❖ Anxiety
- ❖ Bereavement
- ❖ Depression
- ❖ Hyperventilation
- ❖ Panic (short version and long version)
- ❖ Relaxation
- ❖ Self-Harm
- ❖ Self-Help websites
- ❖ Sleep
- ❖ Stress
- ❖ Trauma
- ❖ How to solve problems: a simple DIY technique
- ❖ Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available free of charge from:



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- ❖ Depression Alliance.....Tel: 0845 123 23 20
- ❖ National Debt-line.....Tel: 0808 808 4000
- ❖ Samaritans - confidential support  
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