



Shortness of Breath – Dyspnea

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Dyspnea is a medical term that refers to shortness of breath with minimal exertion. "Hunger for air" "suffocation" or "breath constriction" are expressions sometimes used by patients to describe the uncomfortable sensations of dyspneic breathlessness. Dyspnea is a distressing symptom that accompanies many respiratory diseases. Patients with lung cancer are most commonly affected.

Dyspnea can be one of the most frightening and alarming symptoms of lung cancer. Its degree of intensity can vary from mild discomfort to severe pain at any given time. During an episode of extreme breathlessness, patients not only experience intense pain, but also feelings of panic and fear. These reactions often increase anxiety levels, which further limits oxygen intake, making breathing more difficult and painful. It is crucial to break this cycle as soon as possible. Breathing and relaxation techniques may apply some relief to breathlessness symptoms. If symptoms persist or worsen, contact your physician and proceed to the nearest hospital.

Controlled Breathing or Pursed Lip Breathing

1. Sit up right to increase the capacity of air in your lungs. You can take the weight off your shoulders by resting your hands on the arms of a chair or on your lap
2. Purse your lips as though you are going to whistle
3. If possible, inhale through your nose with a gentle steady breath and try not to force the air out of your lungs
4. Try to relax your shoulders and upper chest muscles as you breathe out
5. Breathe out gently through your pursed lips for 2 slow counts
6. Your exhale should be twice as long as your inhale to empty the "old air" out of your lungs (inhale 3 seconds, exhale 6 seconds). Keep repeating this exercise until you receive some relief from your shortness of breath.

Abdominal Breathing

1. You may sit up right or lie on your back with your knees bent and/or with a pillow under your knees
2. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other on the centre of your abdomen
3. Exhale slowly using the pursed lips breathing technique, gently squeezing your abdominal muscles

4. Inhale softly through your nose and feel your abdomen expand slowly
5. Continue this breathing technique until breathlessness subsides.

Relaxation strategies

1. Stop what you are doing and sit or lay down to rest in a comfortable position
2. Close your eyes or fix your sight on an object in your environment
3. Calmly breathe in and out through your mouth as fast as necessary while trying to relax your entire body
4. After 2 minutes begin to slow your breathing using the pursed lip breathing technique
5. Continue in this position for about 5 minutes.

Use of Medical Therapies

Standard medical treatments for dyspnea can involve therapies that i) increase oxygen levels ii) reduce fluid build-up in the lungs iii) reduce anxiety and pain. Remember to keep your doctor informed and ask which treatment options are the best for you if shortness of breath has become a problem. You may be required to take a series of tests to conclude the exact cause of your breathlessness in order to determine best treatment options.



Standard sitting and resting position for all techniques



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Info Sheet

Sources:

For more information on coping and for emotional support: Speak with your Oncology treatment team which includes a Social Worker, Physician, Nurse, Psychologist and/or Psychiatrist.

Lung Cancer Support Information, Programs and Services:

Lung Cancer Canada; Wellspring; Gilda's Club; Canadian Cancer Society (for information, referral and peer support)

Lung Cancer Canada

1896A Avenue Road. Toronto, Ontario M5M 3Z8

Tel: 416-785-3439 (Toronto)

1-888-445-4403 (Toll Free)

Fax: 416-785-2905

www.lungcancercanada.ca

info@lungcancercanada.ca

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