

# **HYPERVENTILATION**

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## Hyperventilation

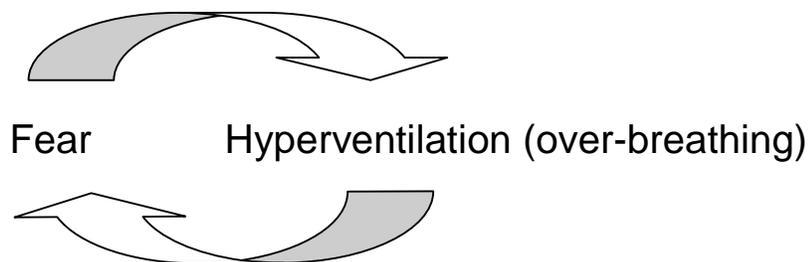
Hyperventilation means breathing in more than your body needs. Another way to describe it is to say 'over-breathing'.

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.



## Returning to normal breathing

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. ) This should be done ) slowly and **without**
4. Breathe out through your mouth. ) holding your breath. ) Repeat no more
5. Breathe your own exhaled air. ) than four times.
6. **Throughout the exercise try to stay calm and relaxed.**

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

## Further help

### Some useful helplines

#### No Panic

Free Helpline (daily 10am-10pm)

0808 808 0545

#### Breathing Space

Free Depression Helpline (daily 6pm-2am)

0800 83 85 87

### Panic websites

#### [www.ioepanic.com](http://www.ioepanic.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.

#### [www.panic-attacks.co.uk](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.

#### [www.nopanic.org.uk](http://www.nopanic.org.uk)

Comprehensive help for panic and associated conditions. Includes telephone and written recovery programmes.

### General websites

#### <http://clinical.dunfermlinelhcc.org.uk/>

Fife Clinical Psychology Department Website

#### <http://www.show.scot.nhs.uk/livinginfife/>

The Living in Fife Website has been designed specifically for people living in Fife. It provides both local and national information about support services.

# Notes

S Black, R Donald, M Henderson 2005  
NHS Borders

***Developed with assistance from: The National Programme for  
Improving Mental Health and Well Being  
[www.wellontheweb.net](http://www.wellontheweb.net)***

*To cut out and keep:*



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**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



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**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