

# HYPERVENTILATION



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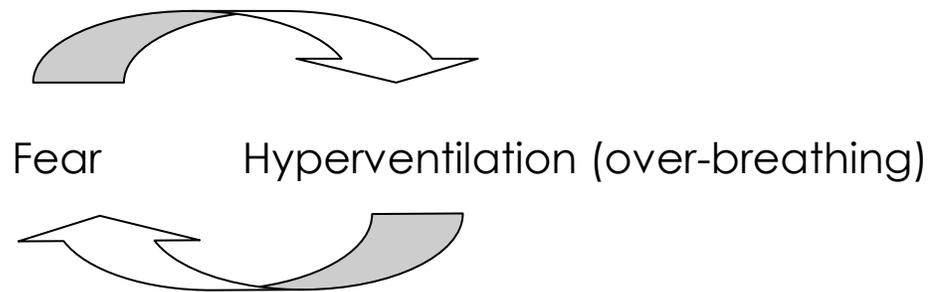
Hyperventilation means breathing in more than your body needs. Another way to describe it is to say 'over-breathing'.

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**

- try to find a quiet place to sit down
- think about the word 'calm'
- try to release some of the tension in your upper body. Try loosening your shoulders and sit with a straight back
- 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
- 4. Breathe out through your mouth ) slowly and **without**
- 5. Breathe your own exhaled air ) holding your breath.
- ) Repeat no more
- ) 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** – confidential helpline

Helpline (Daily 10am-10pm) 0844 967 4848

Youth Helpline (13-20yr olds – Mon- Fri 3pm-6pm)) 0330 606 1174

**Samaritans** – confidential support for anyone in a crisis

National Helpline (24 hours a day) Tel: 116 123

Borders Tel: 01750 20000 (local rate)

E-mail Helpline [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org) (answer within 24 hours)

Visit Local Branch 21 West Port, Selkirk, TD7 4DG

**Living Life** – Appointment-based telephone support based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for anyone over the age of 16 experiencing low mood and/or anxiety

Monday-Friday (1pm-9pm) Tel: 0800 328 9655

## **Panic websites**

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

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

## **Useful reading**

Manicavasagar, Vijaya & Silove, Derrick (2017) *Overcoming Panic, Second Edition* Robinson ISBN: 978-1472135827

A step-by-step guide on how manage panic disorder. Based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

(This book uses cognitive-behavioural techniques to give the reader better coping skills to help them overcome panic attacks and agoraphobia. It provides information about the forms and causes of panic and ways that readers can effectively manage their panic attacks.)

Weekes, Claire (2015) *Self Help for your Nerves* Harpercollins ISBN: 978-0722531556 Emphasises coping with physical aspects of anxiety and panic)

## **Apps for mobile phone and tablets**

A range of self-help apps are available for your mobile phone and tablet. Some of these apps are free of charge, whilst others have a cost attached depending on the developer. Please use the link below to view some suggested self-help apps for different mental health problems:

<https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/category/mental-health/>

*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

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

Agoraphobia

Anger

Anxiety

Bereavement

Depression

Loss

OCD

Panic (short version and long version)

Phobia

How to solve problems: a simple DIY technique

Relaxation

Self-Esteem

Self-Harm

Self-Help Websites

Sleep

Stress

Trauma

Worry

Copies of any of the above booklets are available to download/print at:

[nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing](https://nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/wellbeing)

S Black, R Donald, M Henderson 2005  
NHS Borders

Revised Jan 2020  
Review Jan 2021  
SH5.12