

How to use breathing exercises to clear mucus from your airways

Physiotherapy Department

Information for Patients

Last reviewed: January 2025

Next review: January 2028

Leaflet number: 1225 Version: 2

Why do I need to clear mucus from my lungs/ airways?

When you have a problem with your lungs, your airways can produce more mucus (also called phlegm or sputum) than normal. Regularly clearing this mucus helps to improve the amount of air getting into your lungs, helping you to breathe more easily.

In the long term, effective airway clearance can help to reduce the number of chest infections you may have, and how often you have them.

It will also help to reduce any uncontrolled coughing.

What happens if I don't clear the mucus from my airways?

Mucus that is not cleared from your airways can:

- become infected and cause further damage to your airways.
- block the smaller airways which can mean the lungs are not able to work as effectively.
- make your breathing feel more difficult.
- affect your ability to carry out your normal daily activities.

How does physiotherapy help?

Physiotherapy for respiratory conditions uses breathing exercises (airway clearance techniques) to help clear the mucus from your lungs. It helps to loosen and move the mucus from all areas of your lungs. It is much more effective and efficient compared to coughing alone.

**Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk

There are many airway clearance techniques and your physiotherapist will help choose the best one for you. It may take time to find the right technique for you, so always remember not to force airway clearance and make sure you have plenty of rest time whilst doing it.

Your personalised programme

My technique:

How long do I spend doing it and how often?:

How does this fit in with my inhalers/ nebulisers?:

What else can help?

- Carry out your airway clearance at a time of the day that suits you best, usually at the times of day when you are most productive.
- Make sure you are drinking plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration, especially when you have a chest infection.
- Exercise helps your general health and is also a natural form of respiratory physiotherapy. It improves airflow through the lungs and stimulates coughing, but you should not use general exercise instead of airway clearance exercises.

It is not recommended to carry out airway clearance exercises when tired, in a hurry or straight after a meal.

Remember that strenuous, uncontrolled coughing is exhausting and harmful to your lungs. Your physiotherapist can teach you ways to help control your cough if needed.

What if I have problems with my technique?

Contact your physiotherapist for advice if:

- you have any difficulty carrying out your airway clearance programme.
- your medical condition changes.
- it causes blood in your mucus (haemoptysis).
- your cough increases but it is not clearing the mucus.
- you need any further advice or guidance.

Your physiotherapist will monitor your airway clearance programme and change treatment as needed.

Summary

1. It is important to clear mucus from your lungs to reduce the risk of infection and keep your airways clear.
2. Where possible, arrange your airway clearance exercises after your inhalers/ nebulisers.
3. Your physiotherapist will help you to decide how much treatment is needed and how often, as everybody is different.
4. Any airway clearance technique you use should clear mucus with the minimum of effort to keep any unwanted wheeze, cough and breathlessness away.
5. Airway clearance aims to help bring the mucus as high up the lungs as possible before you cough it up.

6. Mucus may continue to clear for a while after you have done the technique.
7. As you gain confidence with these techniques you will find it easier to avoid coughing immediately at the first sign of mucus.
8. When the lungs produce large amounts of mucus, an airway clearance exercise usually needs to be done at least once a day and sometimes more often.

Contact details

If you do not know how to contact your physiotherapist you can contact the Physiotherapy Department on 0116 258 3595 (Monday to Friday, 8.30am to 4.30pm). Please note that this is not a service for urgent or emergency problems.

For urgent advise please contact your GP or call the NHS helpline on 111.

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔
على هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل
જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿੱਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।
Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk