

Hyperventilation syndrome is a common disorder that can present with a wide range of symptoms. It is often linked with anxiety attacks or panic disorder.

### **Symptoms of Hyperventilation**

- Shortness of breath, a choking or smothering feeling, a feeling that you can't catch your breath.
- A pounding heart.
- Trembling or shaking.
- Dizziness or feelings of being light headed.
- Feeling faint.
- Blurred vision.
- Altered sensations in the body arms or legs such as numbness, tingles or jelly like sensations.
- Numbness or tingling around the lips or mouth.
- Sweating, dry mouth , hot or cold flushes , nausea or butterflies.
- The feeling that you might die.
- Feelings that you can't speak or are losing control of yourself.
- Excessive sighing or yawning.

### **Symptoms may be acute or chronic:**

For the acute or first time sufferer symptoms may arise quite suddenly and can often be frightening. It is not uncommon for sufferers to seek help at the local accident and emergency department. It is here that many patients get their initial diagnosis of a panic or anxiety attack.

For the chronic Hyperventilator the symptoms of a breathing disorder may not be as obvious, but recurrent episodes of the above symptoms may begin to occur on a regular basis. Stressful situations may provoke an episode but equally symptoms are also common when the person slows down to relax or sleep.

### **What causes the symptoms?**

Many of the symptoms described above are caused by over breathing. The average person needs to take 10-12 breaths per minute. We breathe in oxygen, our body cells use this oxygen and chemical processes occur which result in us breathing out carbon dioxide. Our brain constantly tries to balance the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide we have in our blood. If we over breathe we can breathe out carbon dioxide too quickly.

Low carbon dioxide in the body is called hypocapnia and this can cause changes in the blood flow to the brain, which results in the feelings of dizziness, weakness or numbness, confusion or agitation or

feeling faint. It can also cause muscle spasms and twitches. When these symptoms are felt, feelings of panic may arise and the urge is to increase our breathing further.

Normally our brain tells us to breathe slower before the carbon dioxide levels fall to the point where we would get symptoms. But sometimes a stressful event, feelings of anxiety, or pain may allow us to psychologically override the subconscious mind's normal response and we continue to breathe too quickly, resulting in unpleasant symptoms.

This psychological response can eventually reset the brain's perception of what is a "normal level" of carbon dioxide in the body to a new lower level.

Once this has happened, normal levels of carbon dioxide are regarded by the brain as high and prompt over breathing which, in due course, leads to hyperventilation symptoms. This is why, when we naturally slow down our breathing at night when we are relaxing or asleep, it may still provoke symptoms, even though we may not be feeling stressed or anxious. The altered breathing pattern has become a vicious circle.

### **What treatment can help these symptoms?**

- The most important thing to recognise is that your symptoms are not dangerous or life threatening and you will get better.
- Most people with hyperventilation syndrome have got into the habit of breathing with their upper chest/ribs. Recognising this pattern of breathing and using diaphragmatic breathing techniques to alter this pattern will reduce anxiety levels and the feelings of being unable to take a full breath. Your symptoms are caused by imbalances of carbon dioxide levels in your blood stream and learning to breathe correctly will rectify this and help to reset the breathing centre in the brain to a more normal level.
- Recognising what activities or situations tend to trigger your symptoms will help.
- Learning how to relax and breathe will be an important part of your recovery.
- Talking to people who have had similar experiences can be useful, you will be amazed at how common these disorders can be.
- Osteopathic treatment to reduce tensions in the neck and chest can enable more comfortable breathing and allow the body to relax into a more natural pattern.
- If the initial symptoms were caused by a traumatic or stressful episode it is worth considering speaking to a counsellor, as discussing issues surrounding the events will often help to allay fears and worries that may trigger your symptoms.
- Homeopathic and herbal remedies can be extremely useful in reducing symptoms and helping you to deal with acute attacks. Discussing your specific needs with a qualified practitioner is advisable as they can advise you specifically on which remedies to use.
- In some cases your GP may be willing to prescribe tablets to help alleviate severe anxiety.

## **Bedale Osteopaths**

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