

'Life is in the breath'

– Indian Yogi –

Hyperventilation means overbreathing, that is breathing in excess of your body's needs.

Acute hyperventilation is very common during panic attacks. This is understandable because some degree of overbreathing is part of the body's normal response to threat. Recall how when you are suddenly shocked you might gasp. The function of overbreathing is to supply the muscles with more oxygen for 'fight or flight'. It often happens after a combination of strong emotion (fear, excitement, anger etc) and physical exertion, although either can bring it on. If the extra oxygen isn't needed by the muscle, the effect can be dramatic and terrifying and can cause the following symptoms:

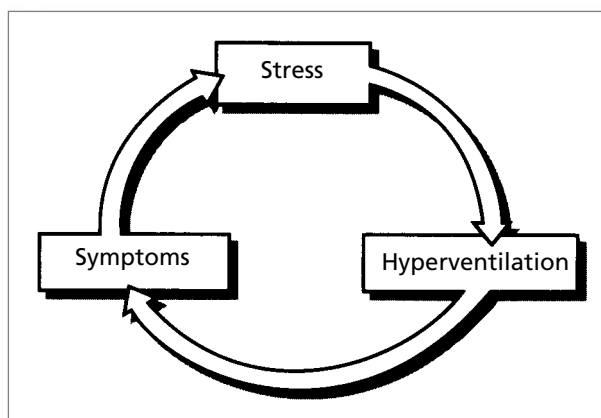
- ◆ rapid breathing, but difficulty in getting breath
- ◆ tightness in the chest
- ◆ very rapid heartbeat
- ◆ sweating
- ◆ tingling or numbness
- ◆ feeling of faintness
- ◆ feeling of unreality
- ◆ visual problems/blurred vision
- ◆ rigid muscles, cramps
- ◆ sudden emotional outbursts, eg, crying
- ◆ feeling too hot or too cold

When you begin to overbreathe, the balance of gases in the lungs is upset. Breathing in an excess of air too frequently pushes out the carbon dioxide which normally forms a reservoir in the lungs. Because there is too little carbon dioxide in the lungs, the blood becomes more alkaline, which causes the above symptoms. It is important to remember that the symptoms are the effects of too little carbon dioxide.

Two things are necessary: to stop overbreathing, and to get enough carbon dioxide back into the lungs.

A general point to remember is that hyperventilation produces symptoms which are very frightening in themselves. These can cause more overbreathing.

It is very important to break this vicious circle of hyperventilation, leading to frightening secondary symptoms, leading to stress, by learning to control your breathing.



Hyperventilation is not always obvious to the person themselves. In many cases hyperventilation can be very subtle, and may be habitual or chronic – going on over a long period of time. This makes the person more vulnerable to panic if placed in a stressful situation which increases the breathing very slightly.

As it is hard work to overbreathe, prolonged periods of hyperventilation will often result in tiredness or exhaustion.