What Exercises Can Help Increase Lung Capacity?

Certain exercises can help the lungs work more efficiently. This can reduce shortness of breath when a person's lung capacity is limited.

The lungs allow for the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, which is essential for the body to function.

Age, smoking, pollution, and other factors can cause the lungs to work less efficiently. Certain health problems can restrict the lungs' capacity, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma.

A person may not be able to change how much oxygen their lungs can hold. However, breathing exercises can help reduce shortness of breath caused by limited lung function.

This article looks at three exercises that can help reduce shortness of breath in people with chronic lung conditions or respiratory infections.

Pursed lip breathing

Pursed lip breathing can help keep the airways open for longer, facilitating the flow of air into and out of the lungs.

To do pursed lip breathing:

- Sit up straight — good posture can help promote lung movement.
- Breathe in deeply through the nose in a slow, controlled fashion.
- Purse the lips — they should be almost touching, as when making a "kissing" face.
- Breathe out through pursed lips — ideally, the exhalation should be twice as long as the inhalation was.

Some people find it especially beneficial to focus on time, for example by breathing in for 5 seconds and breathing out for 10 seconds. It can help to keep a clock that shows the seconds nearby.

For people who are not very physically active and may not be exercising their breathing muscles frequently, pursed lip breathing may have particular benefits.

Belly breathing

This exercise from the American Lung Association helps improve the rate at which the lungs expand and contract.

Belly breathing specifically focuses on strengthening the diaphragm muscle, which allows a person to take a deep breath.

To do the exercise:

- Rest a hand or a lightweight object on the stomach.
- Breathe in slowly through the nose and note how far the stomach rises.
- Breathe out through the mouth.
- Breathe in through the nose, this time trying to get the stomach to rise higher than it did with the previous breath.
- Exhale, and try to make each exhalation two or three times as long as each inhalation.
- Periodically, roll the shoulders forward and backward and move the head from side to side to ensure that the exercise is not contributing to tension in the upper body.

To enhance lung function, practice belly breathing and pursed lip breathing for about 5–10 minutes every day

Interval training

If breathlessness or shortness of breath arise while exercising, interval training may be a better alternative to steady exercise.

Interval training involves alternating between short periods of more strenuous and less strenuous exercise. For example, a person could try walking at a very fast pace for 1 minute, then walking more slowly for 2 minutes, in a cycle.

Similarly, a person may perform a strength training activity for 1 minute, such as bicep curls or lunges, then walk at a gentle pace for 2–3 minutes.

Interval training gives the lungs time to recover before challenging them again.

Any time that exercise causes shortness of breath, it is a good idea to slow down for a few minutes. It can help to practice pursed lip breathing until the breathlessness subsides.

Tips for preserving lung health

Exercises cannot reverse lung damage, but they can help a person use their lungs to their fullest capacity.

There are other ways to improve and preserve lung health, such as:

- refraining from smoking
- drinking plenty of water
- staying physically active

If a person has symptoms of poor lung health, such as shortness of breath during daily activities, pain when breathing, or a cough that will not go away, they should contact a doctor.

The earlier a person receives treatment for any lung problems, the better the outcome is likely to be.

When do breathing exercises work?

Just like aerobic exercises help improve the health of the heart, breathing exercises can make the lungs function more efficiently.

Pulmonologists — lung specialists — recommend breathing exercises for people with COPD and asthma because they help keep the lungs strong.

A person should do these exercises when they feel that their lungs are healthy, to build strength, and continue the techniques if they feel short of breath.

Deep breathing exercises may help increase lung capacity. For instance, the British Lung Foundation say that deep breathing can help clear mucus from the lungs after pneumonia, allowing more air to circulate.

To perform this exercise: Breathe deeply 5–10 times, then cough strongly a couple of times, and repeat.

Other exercises, such as pursed lip breathing, can help manage breathlessness during respiratory illness. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, this may help with breathlessness caused by COVID-19.

However, researchers have not yet investigated the effects of breathing exercises on lung capacity in people with COVID-19. There is currently no evidence that they are a safe or effective way to manage symptoms of this new condition.

Overall, it is a good idea to speak to a doctor before trying any new breathing exercise.

While breathing exercises may provide benefits to people with mild respiratory symptoms, people with severe symptoms may require oxygen therapy or the use of a mechanical ventilator.

Anyone who is worried about their respiratory symptoms should speak to a healthcare provider.

Summary

Lung exercises, such as pursed lip breathing and belly breathing, can help a person improve their lung function.

However, it is a good idea to check with a doctor before trying any new exercise, even a breathing exercise. This is especially true for people with underlying health issues, such as COPD.

The doctor may make recommendations to ensure that the person sees the best results.

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