CLEARING SPUTUM FROM YOUR LUNGS

Chronic lung conditions often cause an increase in the amount of sputum (phlegm) produced in the lungs. When sputum is allowed to build up, it causes frequent coughing and shortness of breath. Most importantly, this can lead to chest infections and having to go to hospital.

Signs and symptoms of a chest infection

The following signs and symptoms are typical of someone who may have a chest infection:

- An increase in the amount of sputum produced.
- A change in colour of your sputum (for example, from white to yellow, or yellow to green).
- A change in thickness of your sputum.
- Developing a temperature.
- Feeling much more short of breath than usual.

If you have one or more of these signs and symptoms, you should see your local doctor as soon as possible - early treatment may prevent your infection from getting worse.

Helpful Hints

Timing of Breathing Exercises

- You may find it helpful to complete your breathing exercises at a certain time of day when you are most productive of sputum, for example, first thing in the morning or before you go to bed. Alternatively you may choose to do your breathing exercises in conjunction with your nebuliser regime.
- If you have been prescribed bronchodilator medication (medication to help open up your airways) such as Ventolin, it is a good idea to use it before you start. By opening up the airways, it may make it easier to clear the sputum from your lungs.

- Many people find that completing the exercises before they participate in exercise means that they do not cough as much, feel less short of breath and are able to do more in the exercise session.
- Your physiotherapist will advise you on how frequently you should be completing the exercises. Be aware that you may need to increase the frequency of the exercises if you have a chest infection.

Monitoring your sputum

- It is also important that you monitor the amount, colour and thickness of your sputum. You can do this by ensuring you spit out any sputum that is produced, as above.

Dehydration

- Being dehydrated may cause your sputum to become thick, sticky and difficult to cough up. Therefore, it is important to drink enough water to avoid dehydration (note: those people who are on fluid restrictions should note drink more than the amount prescribed by their doctor).
- Some people may also be prescribed an expectorant, steam inhalations or saline nebulisers to aid in loosening sputum.

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Deep breathing exercises

Performing deep breathing exercises regularly, as outlined below, can assist in clearing sputum from your lungs. Ensure you are relaxed and not acutely short of breath before you start the exercises. If you feel short of breath, perform the relaxed breathing techniques your Physiotherapist has taught you until you feel more in control of your breathing.

The exercises can be performed in a number of positions - for you, the correct position is _____.

1. **Deep Breathing**
   Take _____deep breaths in, holding each breath for _____ seconds.

   Keep your shoulders relaxed, try to get as much air in as possible and expand the lower parts of your lungs (at the bottom of your rib cage), then breathe out gently.

2. **Relaxed Breathing**
   Relax and slow your breathing down for approximately 30 seconds.

3. **Deep Breathing**
   Repeat step 1.

4. **Relaxed Breathing**
   Repeat step 2.

5. **Huff**
   Huff a few times until you feel that sputum is ready to be coughed out.

A "huff" is similar to the action used to fog up a mirror/pair of glasses. To perform an effective huff:

- Make an "o" shape with your mouth, keeping the back of your throat open.
- Take a small breath in.
- Force the air out firmly, using your tummy muscles to make the huff sound.

6. **Cough**
   Cough strongly. Any sputum produced should be spat out into a tissue or container.

7. **Repeat the cycle from the start**

The aim is to continue the breathing exercises until you feel as though your lungs are clear, or you are getting tired and need a rest.

This process should not take any longer than 10-15 minutes in any 1 position.

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