Help in Understanding Hyperventilation

Hyperventilation (overbreathing) is the commonest cause of dizziness and is often associated with physical symptoms. It can be overcome by recognising the cause, and obeying a few simple rules.

What are the symptoms?
- Light headedness, dizziness, faintness, “giddiness”
- Tightness or pain in the chest
- Dry mouth
- Heart beating faster
- Blurring of vision
- Sweating
- Trembling of hands and legs
- Weakness (Jelly legs)
- Pins and needles in hands, feet and around mouth
- Headache
- Anxiety, fear or panic
- Sensation of being unable to breathe
- Spasms of hands and feet
- A feeling of having a heart attack, passing out, losing control or of being about to die.

When you over-breathe you may swallow air causing
- Distension of the stomach
- Burping
- Passing wind

What do you mean by over-breathing?
- Deep sighing breaths
- Yawning often
- Rapid shallow breathing
- Deep breathing

How does this cause symptoms?

Normally nature takes care of the rate and depth of breathing. The carbon dioxide (CO₂) in your blood makes you breathe enough to eliminate it and get sufficient oxygen.

If you over ride nature and breathe too much you wash out too much CO₂. This alters the blood flow to your brain and nerves and makes you feel dizzy. It also reduces the available calcium in the blood, which can cause “pins and needles” and make the hands and feet spasm.
Adrenaline increases in the blood stream causing a feeling of anxiety, sweating and trembling, and makes the heart beat faster. Contraction of muscles causes pain and tightness in the chest and headache.

These symptoms can be very frightening. Fear that something serious is happening can cause a cycle of panic, hyperventilation and physical symptoms, but the symptoms caused by hyperventilation are not dangerous and if you can control your breathing the symptoms will settle down.

How can you stop it?
Look for the first signs of sighing or yawning.

- Sit down
- Hold your breath and count to 10
- Breath out slowly and say “relax” to yourself
- Then breathe in and out slowly every 6 seconds (10 breaths per minute)
- As soon as possible forget about your breathing and let nature do it for you.
- If this doesn’t work rebreathing into a paper bag can be helpful

General Principles
- Take it easy. Talk more slowly. Walk more slowly. You have plenty of time.
- Think positively. With help you can cope with your problems.
- Spread out your workload through the day. Give yourself enough time for each task.
- Remain calm
- Don’t bottle up your feelings - discuss any worries or things that make you angry or upset
- Eat regular meals and don’t hurry them
- Reduce your caffeine intake
- Learn to recognise any tendency to over-breathe
- Relax your muscles - no frowning or jaw clenching
- Learn and practice a relaxation technique-ask for an advice sheet
- Take regular exercise
- Take time out for social activities and holidays

Additional Resource for Accessing Psychological Therapies for people with Depression and Anxiety Disorders