

Breathing exercises after surgery



After surgery, you'll need to do deep breathing and coughing exercises to prevent lung problems. This sheet explains the benefits of these exercises and how to do them correctly.

Why is it important to do breathing exercises?

These exercises allow you to breathe better and to cough up secretions (mucus).

They also help prevent certain complications that can occur after surgery, such as:

- crushed alveoli of the lungs (atelectasis)
- lung infection (pneumonia)

It's also important to move, sit in a chair, and walk as soon as possible. This will help you breathe better.

What could lead to respiratory complications after my surgery?

Complications can be caused by:

- breathing less deeply because of pain
- moving less
- a cough that's less effective because of pain or the type of operation you had.

When should I do my deep breathing and coughing exercises?

You should start doing the exercises as soon as you wake up after surgery, unless otherwise instructed. You'll need to keep doing them until you go home.

Frequency: at least once every hour, and do 10 repetitions each time.



If you've been prescribed pain medication, take it before starting the exercises. This will help you do them well.

How do I do my breathing exercises?

Follow the instructions on page 2. If you have questions, the nurse or physiotherapist will be able to help you. The exercises can be done **with or without a spirometer**. The spirometer is a device that gives you a visual cue of the amount of air being inhaled.

Take your time, and take breaks during the exercises if it's hard for you. This will help you maintain a good technique.

Without a spirometer

1. Sit on a bed, at the edge of a bed, or in a chair, with one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest. Close your mouth.



2. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Your belly should swell to the point that your hand moves.
Hold that breath for 3 seconds.



3. Exhale slowly through your mouth as if you were blowing out a candle, until you have no air left.

4. After 10 deep breaths, cough (see box below).

How to do the coughing exercise

- Sit on a bed or in a chair.
- To reduce pain and protect your incision, squeeze a pad of towels against your incision with both hands.
- Inhale slowly. Hold your breath and cough 2 times in a row without taking a breath.
- If you have secretions, spit them out.
- Feeling discomfort while coughing is normal. But if you have too much pain, ask for a painkiller.

With a spirometer

The spirometer allows you to better see how your breathing is improving.

1. Sit on a bed or in a chair.
2. With the handle in your left hand, hold the spirometer in front of you, in an upright position.
3. Exhale through your mouth, until you have no more air.
4. Squeeze your lips tightly around the tip of the device.
5. Inhale slowly and deeply through your mouth. In the device, on the right, a small indicator will rise. Try to keep it between the two marks for 2 or 3 seconds.
6. Exhale simply through your mouth.
7. After 10 deep breaths, cough (see the box).

Are there any risks in doing these exercises?

Many people are afraid their incision will open when they do these exercises. That won't happen. It's sewn securely.

Who can I contact for help or to ask questions?

If you have any questions, feel free to contact a member of your care team.



USEFUL RESOURCES

Other CHUM health fact sheets are available. Ask your care team which fact sheets can help you.



You can also read them online.
chumontreal.qc.ca/fiches-sante

The content of this document in no way replaces the advice of your healthcare professional.

To find out more about the Centre hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal
chumontreal.qc.ca