BREATHING BY DESIGN

Understanding Over-Breathing

(Hyperventilation = Breathing Too Much)

Most of us assume that breathing more is good for us as you will get more oxygen. In fact, many people breathe more than their body needs, without realising it. This is called hyperventilating or over-breathing.

Over-breathing doesn't just mean breathing faster. It can also mean taking breaths that are too big, using the mouth instead of the nose, or using the wrong muscles to breathe. Over time, this can upset the body's natural balance and lead to a range of uncomfortable symptoms.

Why Breathing Balance Matters

Breathing has two main jobs:

- Bringing oxygen (O_2) into the body
- Removing carbon dioxide (CO_2)

While O_2 gets most of the attention, CO_2 is just as important, this is the gas that is controlling how we breathe. When we over-breathe, too much carbon dioxide is blown off, which affects the chemical balance of the blood. This is known as hypocapnia. This causes O_2 to stay "stuck" to your hemoglobin (the Bohr Effect) instead of being released to your tissues. It also causes blood vessels to narrow, causes nerves and muscles to function poorly, affects how the gut works, causes sensory disturbances, brain fog and fatigue. This can lead to a range of physical and psychological symptoms.

Common Signs Of Over-Breathing

People who over-breathe may notice symptoms such as:

- Shortness of breath
- Frequent sighing or yawning
- Tightness in the chest
- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Tingling in the fingers or around the mouth
- Feeling anxious or panicky for no clear reason
- Fatigue
- Poor concentration and focus

These symptoms can be worrying, but they may be the result of poor breathing.

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How Over-Breathing Develops

Over-breathing often starts during times of stress, illness, pain, or emotional upset. Fast or deep breathing can become a habit, even after the original cause has passed.

Other common triggers include:

- Long-term stress or worry
- Lack of physical activity
- Poor posture
- Breathing mainly through the mouth

Because breathing is automatic, people are usually unaware their pattern has changed.

Why Do I Yawn and Sigh A Lot?

Your body has receptors that are monitoring the levels of CO_2 in your bloodstream. If you have been over-breathing for an extended period of time these receptors reset the level of carbon dioxide at which they trigger. If they notice an increase in CO_2 levels they will tell you to take a big breath to blow off what they perceive as being too much CO_2.

Improving Breathing Habits

The aim is not to breathe more, but to breathe more efficiently. Small changes can make a big difference.

Helpful steps include:

- Breathing gently through the nose whenever possible
- Allowing the breath to be calm and regular
- Avoiding habitual sighing or big breaths
- Improving posture so the chest and ribs can move freely
- Slowing the rate of breathing down

Learning to breathe less, not more, can help restore the body's natural balance.

When To Seek Advice

If breathing symptoms are new, severe, or worsening, it's important to seek medical advice to rule out other causes and once these have been excluded, breathing retraining can be a useful and safe way to reduce symptoms and improve overall wellbeing.