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Breath Support and Control

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Breath support and control are important for everyday functions, such as speaking, eating, exercising, and relaxing. Breath support refers to how we stabilize our bodies for air flow. Breath control is how we regulate and coordinate airflow for different activities. We need good breath support and control for various purposes, including playing instruments, singing songs, swimming underwater, and doing yoga. In school, students need good breath support and control when reciting lines for a play, reading aloud in class, talking louder in a noisy cafeteria, and running in physical education class.

Breath flow powers our voice for conversation. We inhale (take air in) to fill our lungs, then exhale (let air out) when we speak. The longer the word, phrase, or sentence, the more air we need. Different speech sounds use different amounts of air. For example, /k/ is a quick sound that requires a short burst of air, while /s/ is a long sound that requires a continuous flow of air. In conversation, we pause at times in order to refill our lungs. We then continue to speak on the new air supply. Inhalation/exhalation is an automatic process; however, some individuals have difficulty maintaining breath support and/or control and need specific practice to improve their breathing for different activities.



Improving Breath Support and Control

There are different ways to help an individual improve breath support and control. Intervention will be specific to each individual. Some target skills include:



- increasing the lung capacity or available breath supply



- practicing breathing patterns for speaking, exercising, relaxing, etc.



- taking in more air or using bigger breaths
- breathing from the diaphragm or "belly" instead of shallow "chest" breathing where the shoulders raise up

Sometimes, individuals will lie down to practice different breathing exercises. This helps them see and feel the belly rise when breathing in and lower when breathing out. Placing and holding the hands on the rib cage is another technique to increase awareness of breathing.



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Professionals who may provide respiratory-related services include an otolaryngologist or ear-nose-throat doctor (ENT), respiratory therapist (RT), physical therapist (PT), occupational therapist (OT), and speech-language pathologist (SLP). An OT or PT may work on strengthening and coordinating muscles for posture or positioning of the head and/or body. They may use special chairs, with seat belts, which help an individual sit up straight in order to get the best possible air flow.

SLPs can help individuals improve breath support and control through a variety of activities. Different breathing skills include: increasing one's awareness of breath; taking bigger breaths; keeping a steady breath when speaking; and using a louder volume. Some activities to practice breathing are: **blowing exercises**—blowing a feather across a table; blowing a pinwheel; blowing bubbles; **speech exercises**—holding out vowel sounds (e.g., "eeee..."); singing songs (e.g., Happy Birthday); and **functional exercises**—relaxing and breathing deeper ("belly" breathing); blowing a whistle; blowing up a balloon.



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