Hyperventilation Syndrome

Hyperventilation is fast and shallow breathing. This type of breathing may actually make you feel breathless. This type of breathing may make you think you have to catch your breath. Because of feeling like you cannot get enough air, you have been breathing more than normal (*overbreathing*). You are blowing off too much carbon dioxide which changes your acid-base balance. This leads to the tingling and numb feelings in your fingers, toes, and around the mouth. If this continues your fingers, hands and toes may go into spasm and curl up. You may feel as though you are going to die.

Hyperventilation is usually associated with anxiety and panicky feelings. Often feelings of panic and rapid breathing become a vicious cycle. Panic leads to rapid breathing while breathing rapidly can make you feel panicky.

If you hyperventilate you may not even be aware of it. Instead you may be aware of the associated symptoms including:

- Chest pains.
- Palpitations.
- Dizziness.
- Lightheadedness.
- Dry mouth.
- Weakness.
- Confusion.
- Tingling sensations.
- Sleep disturbance.

One common question is, “Why did this happen to me while I was sleeping. I was not anxious.” The answer is unknown. One theory is that it may occur during dream activity. It may disturb you more when it wakes you from a sound sleep.

CAUSES

Although anxiety and/or panic attacks are some of the most common causes for the syndrome, other causes include:

- Nervousness.
- Stress.
- Stimulant use.
- Lung Disease.
- Infections like pneumonia.
- Heart problems.
- Severe pain.
- Waking from a bad dream.
- Drugs or alcohol.
- Pregnancy
- Bleeding.

TREATMENT.

- Re-breathing into a paper bag (NOT plastic) or mask with a tube on it in the hospital or ambulance physically changes the carbon dioxide level. The breathing rate will slow down. The numbness and tingling will slowly go away. You might still feel shaky.
- If anxiety or panic persist, a therapist or psychiatrist may be helpful in understanding and treating the condition.
- Learn breathing exercises that help you breathe from your diaphragm and abdomen.
- Practice relaxation techniques such as visualization, meditation, and muscle release.

Document Released: 12/15/2001 Document Re-Released: 10/14/2010
ExitCare® Patient Information ©2011 ExitCare, LLC.