



BHS Medical Department

Mask Anxiety

You don't have to have an actual physical health issue to feel like you can't breathe with a mask on. In fact, mask anxiety is a thing, especially for those with anxiety or a history of claustrophobia. Sometimes, having something over our mouth and nose can remind us of past trauma and bring back sensations of fear and worry, it's not the mask that is feared, but the feelings that come with wearing one. Symptoms of mask anxiety are rapid heart rate, shortness of breath, chest tightness, sweats and dizziness. It's normal to feel like we can't breathe and want to take it off. You have to teach your brain that it's safe and that you can breathe.

Discomfort impacts how we breathe

First things first: It is reassuring that experts have said repeatedly that wearing a standard face mask does not affect gas exchange, does not lower a person's oxygen levels. Before the pandemic, patients with some diseases would often wear masks in public to avoid respiratory illnesses that could be life threatening.

Lung specialists say much of our breathing is unconscious and driven by our respiratory center, it can also be influenced by the mind. When we're feeling discomfort, even subconsciously, it can change the way we breathe. For instance, if we exhale and it causes our glasses to fog up, we might compensate for that discomfort by not exhaling fully on our next breath.

Inhale, Exhale

Changing our breathing patterns subconsciously can lead to an abnormal breathing pattern: Either we *hyperventilate* or we *hypoventilate*.

When someone hyperventilates, they start to breathe too deeply and too frequently, likely because wearing a mask is making them anxious or nervous. Hyperventilation leads to a low level of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream, since the body is expelling CO₂ faster than it's able to produce it. In turn, this causes dizziness, light headedness and can sometimes cause fainting.

Hypoventilation, on the other hand, occurs when we're breathing too slowly or not exhaling as much as we need. In this case, the body's carbon dioxide level rises, decreasing the amount of oxygen in a person's bloodstream. Hypoventilation can cause sleepiness and a feeling of "air hunger," a sensation where you're unable to get enough air into your lungs. That feeling of gasping for air can also cause anxiety and stress. And while it may be a scary and uncomfortable feeling, the experts say that's all it is, a feeling. You get just as much oxygen whether you are wearing a mask or not.

There are things we can do:

To make mask wearing tolerable do exposure therapy. Try wearing the mask where you feel safe, like your home, starting with a short period of time and then working up to longer periods. Once

this feels manageable, go for a walk outside. The key is to realize that you won't die from wearing a mask or from the anxiety. Challenging anxious thoughts can also be helpful.

How to breathe better?

The good news is that if we find ourselves in a dysfunctional breathing pattern we can easily override it and get rid of any symptoms. The best strategy to reset our natural breathing pattern is become an efficient breather.

- The strategy called "box breathing" in which you visualize a box and trace the outline of the four sides in your mind while inhaling and exhaling slowly. Following the outline of the box, breathe in slowly for four seconds, pause, breathe out completely, and then pause again. This method helps regulate the breathing in a more conscious way and it also reduces stress and anxiety.

- Belly breathing is another quick way to reset. Sometimes with these dysregulated breathing patterns we're just using our chest and neck muscles to breathe, which is inefficient and uncomfortable. Instead, taking a few minutes to focus on using the diaphragm, a dome shaped muscle that lives between the abdomen and chest. Diaphragmatic breathing or belly breathing, encourages optimal oxygen and carbon dioxide exchange, while also normalizing heart rate and lowering blood pressure. To practice belly breathing, relax your hand and place it on the diaphragm, just below your rib cage. When you breathe in, your diaphragm should push your hand away from your body. On the exhale, your hand should return to you.

Ref: Johns Hopkins Medicine