

Airway Clearance Techniques: Huff and cough

What are airway clearance techniques?

Airway Clearance Techniques (ACTs) are an essential part of management for people with CF. Performing regular airway clearance helps loosen the thick sticky mucus from the airways so it can be cleared more easily. Huffing should be part of all airway clearance routines and must be taught by your CF specialist physiotherapist.

What is a huff?

Huffing changes the airflow in the airways to help move mucus towards the mouth so it can be cleared more easily with a cough. A huff is an active breath out with an open throat, like a sigh, as if trying to fog up a mirror. Use tummy muscles to help gently squeeze the air out without causing a wheeze or cough. Huffs can be taught from a young age using cardboard huff tubes and tissue butterflies or a mirror.

Different types of huffs move mucus from different sized airways. Longer, more gentle huffs help to move secretions from lower, smaller airways. To do this type of huff, take a small to medium breath in and huff the air out using your tummy muscles, being careful to avoid a wheeze or cough.

Once the mucus is in the larger upper airways you can use a short, fast huff to shift the mucus. Take a deeper breath in and huff the air out more quickly to clear the mucus.

Listen for the rattling noise your mucus makes – if it is early in the huff it is closer to the mouth, if later in the huff you may need to keep huffing. Try and stop coughing until you can clear the mucus with one or two coughs. Always do quiet breathing after huffing to help the airways relax.

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Things to remember

- When learning to huff, use a cardboard tube to help keep your mouth and throat open.
- Use your tummy muscles to squeeze air out without causing a wheeze or cough.
- Use different sized huffs to shift mucus from different airways.
- Always use relaxed breathing after huffing and coughing.

Useful Resources

<https://www.cff.org/Life-With-CF/Treatments-and-Therapies/Airway-Clearance/Coughing-and-Huffing/>

<http://bronchiectasis.com.au/physiotherapy/techniques/forced-expiration-technique>

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