Airway Clearance Techniques

If your lungs produce a lot of mucus, airway clearance techniques may be prescribed. These techniques help move excess mucus from the airways. Keeping the lungs clear of mucus helps prevent shortness of breath and other symptoms.

Coughing techniques are special ways of coughing that help move mucus up the airways. You may be taught methods such as the “huff” technique (shown here).

1. Sit in a chair with both feet on the floor. Take a slow, deep breath through your nose.

2. To exhale, open your mouth and make a “huff” sound in your throat. (This is the same way you might breathe to clean a pair of glasses.) Huff 2 to 3 times as you exhale. Relax for a few seconds. Then repeat steps as needed.

Postural drainage uses gravity to drain mucus from the lungs. It’s done by lying in certain positions for a given amount of time. Postural drainage may be done along with a technique called chest percussion. This involves clapping on your chest to loosen mucus. Or, a vibrating device may be held against the chest to shake mucus loose.

Positive expiratory pressure (PEP) therapy is done by exhaling into a hand-held device. This device changes pressures inside the lungs, which loosens mucus.

A vibrating vest is worn over the chest. The vest is attached to an air generator that inflates and deflates the vest very quickly. This motion vibrates the chest and loosens mucus.

Keep in mind that these techniques are meant to move mucus up the airways and out of the lungs. Have a box of tissues handy.