Exercising with Chronic Lung Disease: Using the Dyspnea Scale

The Dyspnea Scale measures shortness of breath. While you exercise, think about how short of breath you feel. Notice how hard you are working to breathe. Then pick the number and words on the scale that best reflect how you feel at your current level of effort. For instance, if your shortness of breath is very slight, you’re at level 1. If you feel severely short of breath, you’re at level 5. If you can’t breathe at all, you’re at level 10. Use the Dyspnea Scale to help pace your workout. Unless your healthcare provider or pulmonary rehab team says something else, try to keep your effort level around 3–5 on the scale.

Signs of Overexertion

Stop if you notice any of the signs below during exercise. If you’re at the pulmonary rehabilitation facility, tell a team member how you’re feeling. If you’re exercising on your own, call your pulmonary rehab team or your doctor. Stay alert for these signs:

- Unusual or increasing shortness of breath
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Burning, tightness, heaviness, or pressure in your chest
- Unusual pain in your shoulders, arm, neck, jaw, or back
- A racing or skipping heartbeat
- Lightheadedness, dizziness, or nausea
- Feeling much more tired than usual
- Unusual joint pain

Dyspnea Scale adapted by permission from American Association of Cardiovascular and Pulmonary Rehabilitation, 2004, Guidelines for Cardiac Rehabilitation and Secondary Prevention Programs, 4th ed. (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 81.

Checking Your Heart Rate

You may be told to monitor your heart rate during exercise. Press two fingers (not your thumb) on the inside of your wrist. Count the number of beats you feel for 10 seconds. Multiply the number of beats by 6. This is your heart rate (the number of times your heart beats each minute). You’ll be told what the rate should be when you exercise. This number is your target heart rate.

My target heart rate: ___________________