

Respiratory Care and Management at Home Following Spinal Cord Injury

Assisted Coughing

A guide for patients and carers

If you require a translation or an alternative format of
this leaflet please call 01296 315828

How can I help reduce healthcare associated infections?

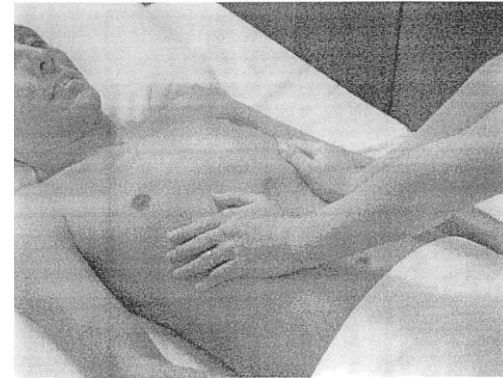
Infection control is important to the well-being of our patients and for that reason we have infection control procedures in place. Keeping your hands clean is an effective way of preventing the spread of infections. We ask that you, and anyone visiting you, use the hand sanitiser available at the entrance to every ward before coming in to or after leaving the ward. In some situations hands may need to be washed at the sink using soap and water rather than using the hand sanitiser. Staff will let you know if this is the case.

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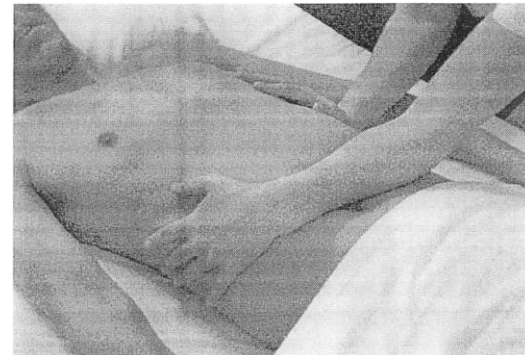
Coughing

Coughing is necessary to help clear secretions which are normally present in the lungs. Usually people cough without thinking to clear these secretions and thereby prevent them from collecting. An ineffective cough brought about by paralysis of the abdominal or intercostal muscles makes you more prone to chest problems, such as chest infections. You will be more at risk of chest congestion if you smoke or when you have a cold or catarrh. The thick secretions from a cold or catarrh can accumulate in the lungs. These collections provide a growth area for bacteria possibly resulting in a chest infection. These secretions could also block the small airways of the lungs.



Assisted Coughing

If you have a spinal cord injury of T10 and above, your stomach muscles may be partially or completely paralysed. This may result in your cough being weak and ineffective. To produce a strong cough you, or your carer, need to imitate the work of the stomach muscles by applying pressure below the ribs. It is vital that your carer, family and close friends know how to assist you (this will be of long term benefit to you). Assisted coughing should not be attempted by anyone who has not been professionally taught unless in an emergency, ie choking or when someone is unable to clear their secretions.



Assisted Coughing When Lying On Your Back

- Your carer places their hands or forearm on the front of your chest just below your rib cage, but above the stomach.
- Take a breath in.
- As you start to cough your carer should apply the pressure (push) inwards and upwards under your rib cage. This should be well co-ordinated with your breathing out.
- The sound of the cough can be used as a guide to the force needed. A good assisted cough sounds like a normal cough.
- Some people are unable to tolerate pushing on the diaphragm, so compression on the sides of the ribcage can be used in an inward and upward direction.

Methods of Assisted Coughing

Depending on your physical ability, assisted coughing can be carried out in lying or sitting positions, with or without the help of another person. Practice will establish the most effective method. Coughing is tiring and therefore allow yourself to take at least 3 breaths between coughs to prevent fatigue.

Self-Assisted Coughing

To cough unaided, you need to produce the pressure usually provided by the stomach muscles. This could be done in the following ways if you have a spinal cord injury below C5/6:

- Hold on to your wheelchair armrest, press the other arm against your stomach and lean well over it while breathing out forcefully.
- Hook one elbow behind your wheelchair push handle. Press the other arm against your stomach and lean forwards over it while breathing out forcefully.
- Hold on to both armrests or hook your elbows behind the wheelchair push handles and lean over until your chest is pressing against your thighs while breathing out forcefully.

Note: Should your cough persist or produce large amounts of frothy sputum, please contact your GP.



Assisted Coughing in Sitting

- Your carer stands either in front or behind your wheelchair. Ensure that your chair is positioned against a wall to stop it being pushed over when doing the assisted cough from the front.
- They place their hands below your rib cage and clasp their hands together or grip their wrists.
- As you cough, they apply pressure by pushing in an inward and upward direction whilst you lean forward.
- Correct timing between you and your carer is essential for the assisted cough to be effective.

