



Te Whatu Ora

Health New Zealand

Waitematā

## Functional Gut Disorder – A Self Help Guide to Irritable Bowel Syndrome and similar conditions

### What are Functional Gut Disorders?

Functional Gut Disorder is the most common diagnosis in gastroenterology, affecting around 33% of people. **The name functional gut disorder (FGD) covers a range of different conditions that share similar symptoms.** There is a lot of information out there, which can be useful, but also confusing.

Lots of healthcare professionals care about FGD, because it has such a big impact on a person's life – we know it makes it difficult to carry out daily activities, as well as causes pain and anxiety around food. Over 20 specialists (gastroenterologists, dietitians and physiotherapists) have worked together to write this guide, which is based on research and experience of what works. 70% of people with FGD / Irritable Bowel Syndrome can expect to feel 70% better after making the kind of changes this guide talks about.

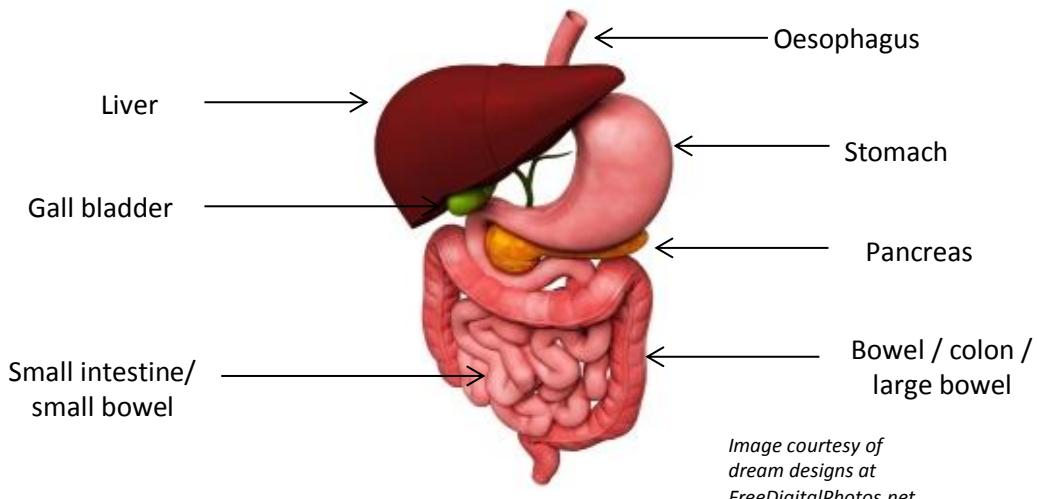
### There are lots of different names for Functional Gut Disorder

It may also be called Functional Bowel Disorder, Functional Gastrointestinal Disorder, constipation, reflux, diarrhoea, Irritable Bowel Syndrome, or IBS.

Most recently the name **Disorders of Gut-Brain Interaction** has been suggested. This name acknowledges what we are learning about how our gut sends messages to the brain and how these messages can get mixed up, contributing to our perception of pain.

These kinds of gut problems cannot be explained by any other medical condition, and can be different for each person.

Your digestive system



### The good news

- FGD doesn't usually go on to cause other conditions.
- There is no evidence that FGD can cause cancer.



Try the suggestions in this guide before you try a low FODMAP diet.  
This guide has helped a lot of other people, and we hope it will help you, too.

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## These are the problems that you might have with Functional Gut Disorders

- Diarrhoea (loose or frequent bowel motions)
- Constipation (hard bowel motions)
- Both diarrhoea and constipation
- Abdominal pain which may go away after going to the toilet
- Feeling bloated
- Feeling like you still need to go to the toilet after just having gone
- Feeling like you need to pass a bowel motion as soon as possible (urgency)
- Passing mucus when you open your bowels
- Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS)

## Other problems might be

- Burping or passing lots of wind
- Not feeling hungry
- Heart burn
- Feeling sick or being sick
- Symptoms get worse during your periods
- Feeling very tired (fatigue)
- Passing urine urgently or feeling like you need to go again soon after going
- Pain during sex

## What are your symptoms

Write in the space below what symptoms you have, whether they have changed, and how long they have been going on. Did anything happen in your life around the time your symptoms started?



Contact your doctor if you notice blood when passing a bowel motion, have lost weight without trying to, or have someone in your family/whānau who has been diagnosed at any time with bowel cancer, Crohn's Disease or Ulcerative Colitis.

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## Why does a Functional Gut Disorder happen?

Often, we don't know why it starts. Sometimes it can be after food poisoning or a stomach bug, a course of antibiotics, a time when you have had a lot of stress or a major life event, or trauma. All these things seem to change how the gut reacts, and how the brain receives information from the gut.

Triggers for symptoms across all FGD can be due to any combination of lifestyle, psychological and/or food aspects, and can be very different for each individual person.

This is an area of active research and this guide is designed to help you work through the first steps of finding your personal triggers.

## What can I do to feel better?

### 1. Read this information

This handout will guide you through the **very important first steps** to try. Please read them carefully, and use a highlighter or pen to mark the suggestions you should try that are relevant to your symptoms.

It takes time for your gut and body to get used to changes.

Try these changes for at least 4 weeks.

Try marking on your calendar each day, if you have managed to do them.



### 2. Keep a symptom diary

Keep a diary of your symptoms and what you have changed (food or lifestyle). It will help you to see when you are feeling better and when you are feeling worse. Try to be specific about what symptoms you are having. For example, “pain/ bloating/ diarrhoea/ constipation/ urgency” is more accurate than “felt unwell”. Use the example below to help get you started.

#### At the end of each day score your symptoms

- Score your symptoms on a 0-3 scale: 0 = no symptoms; 1 = mild/ slight symptoms; 2 = noticeable symptoms; and 3 = severe symptoms.
- Also remember to consider non-dietary causes of your symptoms: e.g. stress, eating on the move more than usual, illness, tiredness and make a note of any.
- If your score suddenly jumps from 0 or 1 to 3, write down what you had to eat over the past 24 hours.

#### Food & Symptom Diary

Date	Food Eaten	Bowel Symptoms	Severity Score (0-3)	Other factors
Example  22/3/17	6am: Muesli with yoghurt and banana	7:30am Pain – Some bloating, loose stools Type 6 on Bristol Stool chart	2 1	Stressed about big day ahead
	10am: coffee with milk and sugar + scone	1030 – sharp cramps 11am – loose stool	3	
	1240pm: Chicken wrap with lettuce, red onion, carrots and mayo	1:30pm Bloating  3pm: Bloating	2 3	Look 6 months pregnant

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## 3. Look at how and what you eat and make small changes

There are some important first steps that can make a big difference for some people. Have a look at the suggestions below and decide which you can start with.

### ✓ Chew your food and eat slowly

It can be helpful to pay attention to the way you eat - you might notice that you are eating quickly or not chewing your food properly.

- Do you stand up while eating?
- Do yougulp (swallow) air when you eat?
- Do you swallow big chunks of food?
- Do you eat on the run or when you are working?

If you answered “yes” to any of these, chances are you are eating too quickly and not chewing your food properly. Chewing food is where your digestion starts, as saliva mixes with food and starts the digestion process. Food is more easily digested when you take time to eat and chew your food well. Chew each mouthful 20 times before swallowing.

### ✓ Eat regularly

Having regular meals is very important to help your digestion work properly. Make sure you eat at regular intervals throughout the day, whether that means three main meals, or three smaller meals with snacks in between. Try not to skip or miss meals as it can slow your digestion. Intermittent fasting is not useful for people with FGD.

Sometimes it takes a bit of preparation and planning to help you to eat regularly. Try writing a weekly meal plan. This will help you organise your meals, have the right food in the house, and may help you save money in the long run.

### ✓ Eat to your hunger

Often we eat out of habit, whether that means the amount we eat or just eating because it is the time to eat. Before eating, ask yourself how hungry you are. If you are not very hungry, have a smaller meal or snack. Stop eating when you are full or comfortable. This will also help you eat more regular meals.

### ✓ Drink plenty - but choose wisely

- Too many caffeinated drinks may make you feel worse. Caffeine can irritate the gut. Try not to have more than three caffeine drinks (tea, coffee, cola) each day.
- Fizzy drinks may make bloating or reflux worse. Try not to have any fizzy caffeine drinks (cola, energy drinks).
- Drinking enough is even more important if you have constipation or have recently started eating more fibre.
- Good things to drink are water, watered down fruit juice and weak herbal teas.
- Try to have at least eight drinks a day (one after each meal and one or two drinks between meals).
- Alcohol irritates and stimulates the gut, so try a period of reduced alcohol.

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## Understand a balanced food intake - aim for variety

Eat a variety of foods through the day, mainly from foods that you prepare or make rather than take-away, pre-prepared or processed foods. If you do eat away from home a lot, choose takeaways that most resemble whole foods. Try and have meals that give you half a plate of vegetables like the example below.



The table below shows the four everyday food groups, and how many serves (handfuls) of each you should aim to eat every day to get the nutrients your body needs.

Food group	Servings to have each day	Examples
Vegetables and fruit	At least 5 of vegetables At least 2 of fruit	½ cup salad, ½ cup cooked vegetables, 1 apple, 1 orange, ½ cup stewed or tinned fruit
Fish, eggs, beans, pulses, poultry, meat	2.5-3	80g fish, chicken or meat, 2 chicken drumsticks, 2 eggs, ½ cup nuts, 1 cup beans or pulses
Dairy products and alternatives	At least 2.5	1 cup milk, 1 potte yoghurt, 2 slices or ½ cup grated cheese
Bread, rice, pasta, and starchy foods	6 – try for wholegrain.	1 medium slice of bread or sourdough, 30g (1 cup) cornflakes or bran flakes, ½ cup cooked rice, pasta, quinoa, taro or cassava, ¼ cup muesli or oats, ½ medium potato or kumara

If you notice specific foods cause an increase in your symptoms, make a note of these and try a different type from the same food group (e.g. s spinach instead of broccoli).

✓ If you do need to see a dietitian, bring your list with you.

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## 4. Activity/exercise does help

Physical activity increases blood flow to the muscles in the digestive system which massage our food along the gut – a process known as peristalsis – causing them to work more quickly and effectively. This can help reduce gut symptoms, especially for those with IBS.

A gentle walk is enough to help improve your digestion, or standing for short periods through the day if you find walking difficult.

Research also suggests that exercise can increase the good bacteria in your gut, helping to reduce inflammation in the body.

**Write down an activity or exercise you can do every day:**



## Next step: Food swaps for specific symptoms

Each symptom may be affected by different foods and eating behaviours. If you are still having symptoms after you have tried the healthy eating habits mentioned above for at least four weeks, look for your symptom(s) below and try these next-step ideas.

Constipation with wind and bloating	
Reduce your intake	Try to have
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fizzy drinks</li><li>• Dried beans and pulses</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ 2 green kiwifruit a day*</li><li>✓ At least 8 glasses of fluid to drink each day</li><li>✓ Ground linseed: start with 1 teaspoon per day and increase every few days to a maximum of 3 teaspoons. Make sure you have <i>50mls of fluid</i> with each teaspoon of ground linseed.**</li></ul>

\*There is good research from New Zealand, that eating 2 green kiwifruit every day can help people with constipation feel better.

\*\*You can find ground linseed (also called ground flaxseed) in the supermarket. It is best sprinkled over cereals/porridge, or blended into a smoothie.

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Diarrhoea	
Reduce your intake	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lactose: This is found in animal milk and dairy products like yoghurt, ice cream, custard and milk chocolate</li> <li>Foods high in fibre (see over the page)</li> <li>Sugar-free products containing sorbitol</li> <li>High dose vitamin C or Magnesium supplements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Lactose-free, rice, almond, or soy milks or lactose-free yoghurts</li> <li>✓ Hard cheeses like edam and tasty have no lactose so you can still eat these</li> <li>✓ Low insoluble-fibre foods (see over the page)</li> <li>✓ Have a break from your sugar-free products or Vitamin C /Magnesium supplements for a few weeks</li> </ul>
If you cut out lactose from your diet and it doesn't change your symptoms after 2-3 weeks, <u>slowly</u> bring regular milk and dairy products back in to your diet.	

Bloating and wind	
Reduce your intake	Try to
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fizzy drinks and alcohol</li> <li>Chewing gum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Eat slowly, chew well, and don't talk when you eat</li> <li>✓ Drink peppermint tea or take peppermint oil capsules (found in pharmacies &amp; health shops)</li> </ul>

Abdominal pain	
Reduce your intake	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Capsaicin (found in chilli &amp; capsicums)</li> <li>Fatty foods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Peppermint oil capsules</li> <li>✓ Peppermint tea</li> <li>✓ Use a wheat bag to help relieve the pain</li> </ul>

Reflux / indigestion	
Reduce your intake	Try to
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoid drinks with meals – only drink 30 minutes before or after eating</li> <li>Fizzy drinks, alcohol or caffeine</li> <li>Spicy foods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Eat slowly, chew well</li> <li>✓ Sit upright after eating; reclining or lying down will make reflux worse</li> <li>✓ Eat small, frequent meals</li> </ul>

### Fibre in foods

Fibre helps form our bowel motions (stools), as well as move things through our gut. It is also a really important food source for our gut bacteria, helping to improve our immunity and health.

Suddenly changing the amount and type of fibre in your diet can cause bowel changes in most people, such as more wind or bloating. To avoid these:

- ✓ Always increase or decrease the amount of fibre you eat slowly over a number of days/weeks.
- ✓ If you eat more fibre, make sure you drink enough, as they work together in the gut.

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INSOLUBLE Fibre	SOLUBLE Fibre
<b>Found in the skins, husks, pips and seeds of plants:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Helps to form your stools by adding bulk</li> <li>Sweeps ‘toxins’ in your gut, helping to remove them</li> <li>Speeds up the time it takes food to move through your gut</li> </ul>	<b>Found in the soft insides of plants:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Softens and thickens the stool to be like a gel</li> <li>Slows down sugar being digested</li> <li>Slows down how quickly food moves through your gut</li> <li>Can help soften stools if constipated</li> </ul>
<b>Why is it important?</b> Helps prevent constipation and other bowel conditions and diseases	<b>Why is it important?</b> Helps control diarrhoea by thickening and slowing the stool, allowing more fluid reabsorption in the colon
<b>Where is it found?</b> Fruits and vegetables, cereals, legumes (dried peas, beans, and lentils), nuts and seeds, wholegrain and wholemeal breads.	<b>Where is it found?</b> Peeled fruits and vegetables, oats, barley, rye, psyllium and ground linseed

- Slowly increasing both soluble and insoluble fibre may improve constipation.
- Slowly changing to lower fibre or more soluble fibre choices may help control diarrhoea.
- Some people with IBS have less bloating if they reduce insoluble fibre, and increase soluble fibre.
- Most plants have a mix of both types of fibres – that is why we recommend at least seven handfuls of vegetables and fruit each day.
- Check you are getting at least five handfuls of vegetables and two handfuls of fruit each day.**

The table below gives you some ideas of lower and higher fibre foods.

Food group	High fibre	Lower fibre
<b>Vegetables</b>	Vegetables with pips, skins and seeds	Peeled vegetables, with pips and seeds removed
<b>Fruit</b>	Fruits with pips, skins and seeds. Kiwifruit	Peeled raw fruit, or fruit without pips and seeds. Cooked or tinned (soft) fruits
<b>Meat, fish, eggs, beans, pulses</b>	Dried beans and pulses, lentils, baked beans, chickpeas, hummus	All meat, fish, chicken and eggs
<b>Dairy products and alternatives</b>	Dairy foods with nuts, seeds, fruit or cereal added	Milk, plain yoghurt, cheese, custards
<b>Bread, rice, pasta and starchy foods</b>	Wholegrain (seeded) and wholemeal breads and rolls, wholemeal flour, wholegrain cereals (muesli, bran flakes, Weetbix, porridge oats), baked potato or kumara with skin on, wholemeal pasta, brown rice, grain or seed crackers or wholemeal biscuits	White bread and rolls, white flour, white rice, potato / kumara with no skin, pasta, taro, white rice, rice cakes, noodles, yam, plain biscuits and crackers

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## Frequently asked questions

### Should I be taking a probiotic?

Probiotics are drinks or capsules that contain live, beneficial bacteria. Some probiotics may help your symptoms by adding “good” bacteria in to your gut. There is some evidence to show that specific types of probiotics may help with certain types of gut problems. These are the probiotic bacteria to look for:

- Diarrhoea after an infection – *S. boulardii* or *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG*
- Bloating – *Bifidobacterium infantis* 10-8 dose, or *Bifidobacterium animalis*
- Constipation – *Bifidobacterium lactis*.

Recently recommendations to take probiotics have changed, and they are no longer recommended as a first option. They can increase wind and bloating in some people. You can decide if you want to try probiotics and see how you go. It is recommended that they are taken for a minimum of four weeks, however if you notice an increase in your symptoms, stop taking them.

### What about fermented foods or live yoghurt?

Lots of people are interested in fermented foods. Yoghurt is a fermented dairy food. You can also buy kefir (fermented milk) and “live yoghurt” (with live bacteria) in the supermarket. These can help to give you good bacteria, and some people find they help to improve their symptoms. Kombucha is a fermented drink, but it can increase wind and bloating due to the carbonation (bubbles of gas) and probiotics you are putting into your gut.

Other fermented foods include kimchee, sauerkraut, sourdough bread, tempeh and miso. If you notice that eating fermented foods makes your symptoms worse, stop eating them.

**Take notice of what works for you and your body.**

### Will herbal drinks help?

- Peppermint tea (and peppermint oil capsules) may help to reduce cramps or bowel spasms.
- Chamomile may help to relax and calm you.
- If you have nausea (feel sick) ginger drinks such as herbal ginger tea or non-alcoholic ginger beer may help.

### Are there medications that might help me?

There are a number of different medications that may help you feel better. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about what might be useful for you.

### What else can I do?

There is a strong link between your gut and your brain. Looking at your stress, and choosing how you relax, can make a big difference in your FGD symptoms too.

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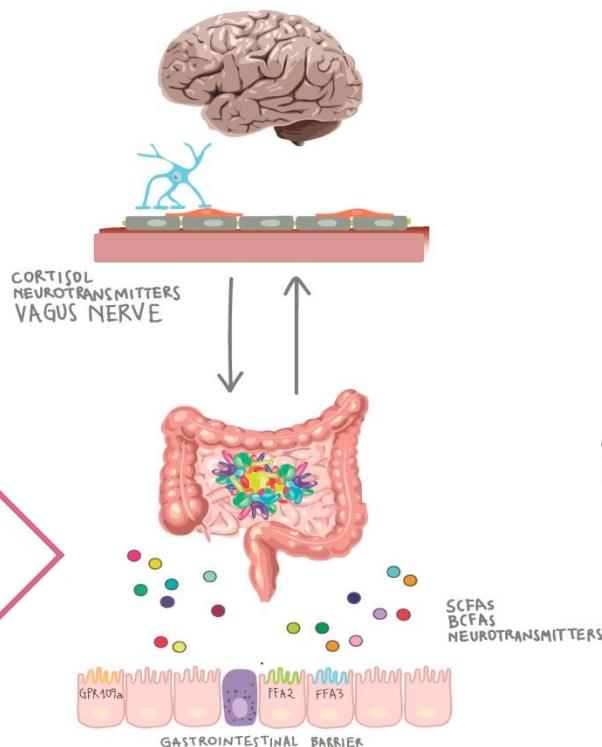
## Stress

You may find your gut problems get worse with stress. **This strong link between stress and symptoms is shown in a lot of research on FGD**, and why they have recently been renamed as Disorders of the Gut-Brain Interaction (DGBI).

This diagram shows how the brain signals to the body – via hormones such as cortisol, nerves and other messenger-signals.

When our brain is stressed, it can change our messenger signals.

This diagram also shows how the gut sends messages back – via the nerves, but also from messengers such as SCFAs and BCFAs that are produced by our gut bacteria when they feed on fibre.  
Things like our diet, medications and highly processed foods can change these messenger signals.



Did you notice on your food and symptom diary that your symptoms got worse when you were stressed? If you feel like your symptoms are all over the place, and you can eat the same thing one day and be OK, but not another time – think about whether your ‘bad day’ had more stress.

## Does stress trigger your symptoms?

On the next page is a table for you to write down any stressful situations you might have in your life. Is there anything you can do to cut down the stress or manage the stress differently? Mindfulness, counselling, relaxation or exercise may all help you manage stress.

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Stressful situation	What can I do?
Example: I don't get on with a work colleague	I could confide in a trusted colleague for advice

Learning to be more mindful in your day-to-day activities can help you focus on keeping your gut problems under control.

## What is Mindfulness?

Paying attention to something, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally (Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2003)

Being mindful means being present in the moment and making conscious decisions about things. Being mindful can help you decide what changes need to happen in your life to help you achieve your goals.

Be more aware ...

- ✓ Be aware of what is going on inside and outside of you – your emotions, your feelings, your environment, the people around you
- ✓ Be aware without judgement, criticism or being negative (especially towards yourself)
- ✓ Accept things for what they are, as we don't always have control over everything.

## Things you can do to practice being more mindful

- ✓ When you eat, slow down, focus on your food and use all your senses – notice, and say to yourself in your mind, the taste, texture, flavours and temperature.
- ✓ Avoid watching TV or reading while you are eating – these are distractions. Try not to judge what you are eating, whether you should be eating it, or what will happen to your gut, simply be non-judgementally curious e.g. instead of thinking "I know I shouldn't be eating this", think "this food is green, and has a crisp crunchy texture." This is a non-judgemental observation.

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- ✓ Connect to nature and your environment: go for a gentle walk and pay attention to the sounds, smells, birds, trees, colours, temperature. Take the time to allow yourself to focus just on your physical surrounds.
- ✓ If you are stressed, say 5 things you can see as you take 5 deep breaths e.g.
  - Breath in ... "I see a window" ... breath out
  - Breath in ... "I see a cup" ... breath out
  - Breath in ... "I see my hand" ... breath out ... and so on.Notice if your mind, stomach and gut feels calmer.
- ✓ Live in the moment. For ten minutes each day try to forget all the things you have to/ need to do/ shopping lists/ projects/ what-if's. Think clearly about what is going on with you for those 10 minutes. Where are you? How are you feeling? Enjoy being there, breathe and be grateful for the break you have given yourself.
- ✓ Another simple idea is to take just a few seconds to notice one thing you can see, one you can hear, and one you can feel.

**Write here what you will do to be more mindful**



### Are you breathing properly?

Although it sounds strange, it is important to make sure you are breathing in the right way, this helps your gut and brain to work better. People with gut problems, or people who are under a lot of stress, can breathe too fast and shallow. Common examples are:

- Feeling shortness of breath, either at rest or when you become anxious
- Breathlessness on exercise, out of proportion to your fitness level
- Feeling of “air hunger” – not able to get enough air in or unable to get a satisfying breath
- You may find yourself holding your breath, particularly when concentrating on a task
- Running out of breath when talking
- Frequent gasps (sudden, short breathing), sighs or needing to take deep breaths
- Tightness or feeling of restriction across the chest
- Palpitations (fast, strong, or uneven heartbeat) or chest pain
- Dizziness or feeling light-headed
- Tingling around your mouth or hands
- Muscle aches and tension around the neck, shoulders or jaw
- Fatigue, headaches, anxiety and panic episodes.

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## Breathing retraining technique

1. Lie comfortably on your back with a pillow under your head and knees.
2. Place a 1kg bag of rice, or a wheat bag, on your stomach.
3. Put your hands above your head in the 'beach pose position'.
4. Gently close your mouth, lips together and keep your jaw loose.
5. Relax your chest and shoulders. Try and "switch off" the muscles in this area.
6. Breathe in gently through your nose, feeling your belly rise or swell, like a balloon half filling up with air.
7. Breathe out lightly through your nose, without pushing, keeping your belly relaxed.
8. Make sure you relax and pause at the end of each breath out.
9. It normally takes about 2 seconds to breathe in and 3 seconds to breathe out, with a short pause before the next breath in.
10. Remember you should be taking gentle breaths, not deep breaths.
11. Breathing should not be forced; it should be silent and regular.
12. Be aware of any areas of tension in your body and concentrate on "letting go" of this tension, particularly in the jaw, neck, shoulders and hands.



It may take many weeks for this to feel natural. As you gain better control, try using this breathing technique in other positions e.g. sitting, standing, driving the car. Check your breathing occasionally during the day.

A physiotherapist may be able to help you with more breathing strategies. Also look at [www.physohypervent.org](http://www.physohypervent.org) for more information.

## Give your body time!

If you have **tried these strategies for at least one month** and there is no improvement or change in your symptoms, ask your doctor or health professional to refer you to a dietitian for further nutrition investigations.

Please bring your food and symptom diary, and any notes on what you have tried, to the appointment.

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