

Learning to breathe again

By Michael A. Lucia, MD

It's as natural as breathing ... or is it?

Breathing is an unconscious process that we assume comes naturally. The truth is bad breathing habits often develop when people experience shortness of breath from a loss of lung capacity.

Rapid, shallow breaths and use of the wrong muscles for breathing can lead to worsening symptoms, even with everyday activities. Patients with chronic lung diseases often experience this and reduce their activity levels, causing even greater decline in overall health and fitness. Many patients believe this is a natural consequence of aging or adjusting to the local high-altitude climate.



Carole Bonnici, respiratory therapist, (center, with clipboard) guides SPEAR patients in their personalized workout programs.

Becoming short of breath also leads to anxiety, which often aggravates the abnormal breathing patterns. This cycle of debilitation can be broken with better breathing patterns, pacing of activities and regular exercise to improve overall strength and fitness.

A common cause of diminished lung function is chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), including diseases such as emphysema, chronic bronchitis and asthma. If you are one of the more than 40 million Americans living with some form of COPD, you probably don't take breathing for granted. You know how illness affects your breathing ... and your life.

Opened in 2003, Northern Nevada Medical Center's Sierra Pulmonary Education & Rehabilitation (SPEAR) program has helped many residents learn to cope with their lung conditions by relearning the proper way to breathe. This eight-to-12-week outpatient pulmonary rehabilitation program is designed to give people with chronic respiratory diseases more independence and improved quality of life.

"The controlled breathing techniques that we teach really work for our patients," said Carole Bonnici, RRT, RCP, respiratory therapist and SPEAR coordinator.

Team-centered treatment

SPEAR combines individualized exercise training and behavioral and educational programs with group support to help patients with COPD control symptoms and improve day-to-day activities. It uses a team approach -- patients work closely with SPEAR exercise specialists, dietitians and respiratory, physical and occupational therapists.

Pulmonary rehabilitation can help people with respiratory illness:

- Reduce and control breathing difficulties and other symptoms.
- Learn to manage disease and reduce dependence on health professionals and costly medical resources.
- Maintain healthy behaviors, including smoking cessation, good nutrition and exercise.

Education

SPEAR provides education on a number of topics, including anatomy and physiology, breathing techniques, medications, nutrition, stress management and relaxation techniques.

Exercise

Participants receive individualized programs using specialized exercise equipment located at the SPEAR center. Exercise sessions and progress are monitored and evaluated by pulmonary rehabilitation specialists. The information is shared with participants' physicians at the end of the course with a full progress report. Patients also are given a maintenance schedule to follow at home.

Class schedule

Participants are scheduled for 18 to 24 individual sessions Monday through Thursday for a period of eight to 12 weeks.

Participants must be nonsmoking (smoke-free for at least three months), have a physician referral and a confirmed diagnosis of a lung condition such as COPD or pulmonary fibrosis. Program participation is covered by most health insurance plans and usually by Medicare.

Board certified in pulmonology and sleep disorders, Michael A. Lucia, MD, serves as medical director for Sierra Pulmonary Education & Rehabilitation (SPEAR). Clinical director Carole Bonnici, RRT, RCP, has more than 25 years of experience in healthcare. The program is located at Vista Medical Terrace, Suite 200, 2345 E. Prater Way, Sparks (up the hill from the hospital). For more information or to arrange a pulmonary rehabilitation evaluation appointment, please call **351-2625** or **351-2600**.



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