



**BTS/ACPRC Guideline**  
**Physiotherapy management of the adult, medical, spontaneously breathing patient**  
**Web Appendix 6 – Respiratory (chest) physiotherapy for people with**  
**Bronchiectasis**

www.brit-thoracic.org.uk

### **Why do I need physiotherapy?**

Bronchiectasis is a condition in which the lungs can produce more mucus than normal and the usual mechanism for clearing it is impaired. As a result, mucus can collect in the lungs and become infected. We call this type of mucus 'sputum', commonly known as phlegm. As a result of this you will be more susceptible to chest infections than other people. You may also have an irritating or embarrassing cough. Each time you get a chest infection it can cause a little more damage and scarring to the lungs. You may find that with these problems you get more breathless and can lose fitness.

### **How can physiotherapy help me?**

Firstly, it is very important to keep fit so that you remain as well as possible. See under 'exercise' in this leaflet. There are also techniques to help with managing breathlessness. Ask to see a respiratory physiotherapist to teach you.

It is also very important to keep the chest as free of phlegm as possible, to stop it from collecting in your lungs and airways (breathing tubes), so that your condition impacts as little as possible on your everyday life. Practising your airway clearance physiotherapy will help you to do that. It will also help with that irritating or embarrassing cough.

### **What will this physiotherapy be?**

Your physiotherapist will need to fully assess you. He or she will ask you questions about your symptoms and your phlegm, and will examine your chest. You will then discuss options of different methods to help you remove the phlegm from your lungs; these are called Airway Clearance Techniques. Your physiotherapist will help you choose the technique that is most suited to you and your particular needs.

### **What Airway Clearance Techniques can I use to clear my chest?**

There are many different airway clearance techniques. Talk to your physiotherapist about choosing the right one for you.

### **How often will I need to clear my chest?**

If you produce phlegm every day then you will need to clear your lungs daily. This will help to keep your lungs clear so that you cough less and have a reduced risk of developing chest

infections. Your physiotherapist will advise you on how many times per day you should be clearing your chest.

If you cough up phlegm only occasionally then you may be taught a technique to use only when needed e.g. when you have a chest infection.

### **How will I know if my regular chest physiotherapy is not enough or if I should change my treatment?**

If the method you use to clear your chest is not working for you, if you have difficulty in clearing your phlegm, or you are not comfortable with the technique, talk to your physiotherapist about trying a different one. At times when you have a chest infection you may also need to change or add to your treatment.

If you notice any of the following signs you should talk to your doctor, specialist nurse or physiotherapist:

- An increase in the amount of phlegm that you are coughing up
- A change in the colour of your phlegm to a darker shade of yellow or green
- An increase in breathlessness
- Increased tiredness
- A reduced ability to exercise or perform everyday physical tasks
- High temperature or fever
- Chest pain that is not usual for you
- Coughing up blood

### **What else can my physiotherapist do for me?**

#### *Exercise*

Any form of exercise that makes you a little breathless, such as walking and swimming is extremely beneficial for people with bronchiectasis. It may help you to clear your chest and will improve your overall fitness. Staying or getting fit will help you build resistance to infections. A physiotherapist will advise you on an appropriate exercise programme to suit you.

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### *Pulmonary Rehabilitation (PR)*

There may be a supervised group exercise programme in your area specifically for individuals with lung conditions. This is called Pulmonary Rehabilitation (PR) and is a mixture of exercise and education sessions over a number of weeks. PR has been shown to be beneficial for people with bronchiectasis. If you are interested, please discuss with your GP or physiotherapist.

### *Breathlessness management*

If you are affected by breathlessness then a physiotherapist will give you advice on how best to manage it. This may include advice on:

- Breathing techniques to help you control your breathing
- Positions to help relieve your breathlessness
- How to pace yourself
- Techniques to help you conserve your energy

### *Pelvic Floor Exercises*

Some individuals with a persistent cough are troubled by incontinence (leaking) of urine. It is a common problem and can be very embarrassing or difficult to cope with in everyday life. It may also make you less inclined to do your airway clearance, which is not helpful to your condition. So if you do suffer from this, please ask for help, as it is very likely to be improved by treatment from a physiotherapist who specialises in these problems.

### **Who should I contact if I do not have a physiotherapist?**

If you speak to your GP, nurse or your specialist doctor they should be able to refer you to a physiotherapist that specialises in breathing problems or incontinence.

### **Useful Contacts**

**Your physiotherapist is \_\_\_\_\_**

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Respiratory Care  
[www.acprc.org.uk](http://www.acprc.org.uk)

British Thoracic Society  
[www.brit-thoracic.org.uk](http://www.brit-thoracic.org.uk)

British Lung Foundation  
[www.lunguk.org](http://www.lunguk.org)

Chartered Society of Physiotherapy  
[www.csp.org.uk](http://www.csp.org.uk)

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Women's Health  
[www.acpwh.org.uk](http://www.acpwh.org.uk)

NHS free smoking helpline **0800 0224332**  
[www.smokefree.nhs.uk](http://www.smokefree.nhs.uk)