

First Aid for Hyperventilation & Panic Attack

Hyperventilation and panic attacks can be frightening but are usually not life-threatening. The goal is to keep the person safe, help them regulate breathing, and reduce fear. Stay calm, speak gently, and follow the steps below.

Common Triggers & Causes

- Severe anxiety, panic disorder, or sudden stress
- Traumatic memories or a panic-inducing situation
- Excessive caffeine, stimulants, or certain medications
- Low oxygen environments or intense physical exertion
- Underlying medical conditions (less commonly)



Recognize the Symptoms

- Rapid, shallow breathing (breathing faster than normal)
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, or tingling in hands/around the mouth
- Chest tightness, palpitations, sweating, trembling
- Feeling of doom, fear of losing control, or fainting
- Nausea, blurred vision, or shortness of breath

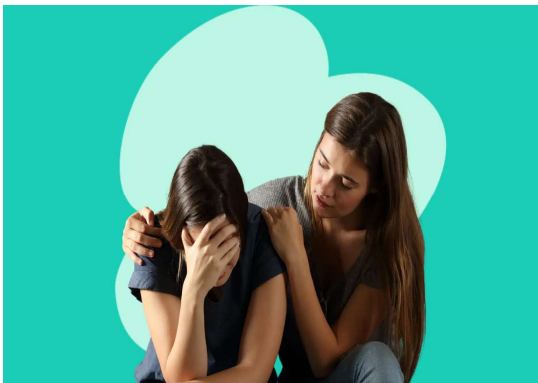
What to Do (Step-by-step)

- **Stay calm.** Your calmness helps the person feel safer.
- Encourage the person to sit down in a comfortable position (avoid standing).
- Lean slightly forward — this helps keep airways open and reduces the feeling of breathlessness.
- Use slow, reassuring phrases: “You’re safe. Breathe slowly with me.”
- **Assist with paced breathing:** breathe in slowly for 4 seconds, hold 1–2 seconds, breathe out for 6 seconds — repeat together.
- Give small sips of water if they can swallow comfortably.
- Remove tight clothing and move to a cool, quiet area if possible.



✗ What NOT to Do

- Don't tell them to “calm down” in a harsh way — that increases stress.
- Don't force rapid or unnatural breathing — guide gently.
- Avoid breathing directly into a paper bag unless a clinician recommends it (and never if there is chest pain or suspected heart problems).
- Don't leave them alone if they are very distressed or fainting.



sos When to Seek Medical Help

- If symptoms last more than 20–30 minutes despite calming and breathing techniques
- If the person has chest pain, fainting, severe shortness of breath, or symptoms of stroke
- If it's their first-ever episode and cause is uncertain
- If they are unable to speak or respond, or you suspect drug or alcohol involvement



Preventing Hyperventilation & Panic Episodes

Prevention focuses on managing stress, recognizing triggers, and building coping tools. For people with recurrent panic attacks, professional help and a written action plan are strongly recommended.

Regular Self-care & Stress Management

- Practice regular relaxation (deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness).
- Exercise regularly — moderate activity reduces anxiety over time.
- Limit caffeine, nicotine, and stimulant use.
- Maintain regular sleep patterns and hydration.





✂ Build a Coping Toolkit

- Learn and practise breathing exercises daily so they are familiar during an episode.
- Identify triggers and create a step-by-step plan the person can follow.
- Consider therapy (CBT) or medications when recommended by a professional.
- Carry a note or app with grounding exercises (5 senses grounding, slow breathing script).

⚠ Supportive Environment

- Friends/family should learn how to support someone during an attack without taking over.
- Inform workplace or school (if appropriate) so reasonable adjustments can be made.
- Seek professional assessment if attacks are frequent or worsen.



🏠 Treatment & Ongoing Care

Treatment depends on cause and severity. For a single panic attack, first aid focuses on breathing and reassurance. Ongoing care may involve therapy and sometimes medication.

🔍 Immediate vs Long-term Care

Immediate: breathing techniques, reassurance, grounding, remove triggers when possible. **Long-term:** cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), breathing training, and —

where appropriate — medications prescribed by a clinician (SSRIs, SNRIs, or short-term benzodiazepines under supervision).

Important: Medication should only be taken when prescribed by a qualified healthcare provider. If the person has existing heart or respiratory disease, seek medical evaluation.