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# Breathing Exercises: Using a Manual Incentive Spirometer

## Introduction

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Breathing can be hard after you've had surgery, when you have a lung disease like [COPD \(/health-library/stc123675#stc123675-sec\)](#), or if you're on bed rest. You may find that you can only take small, shallow breaths. Breathing this way makes it harder to get air into your lungs and can cause fluid and mucus to build up in your lungs. This could cause a serious lung infection like pneumonia.

Using an incentive spirometer can help you practice taking deep breaths, which can help open your airways, prevent fluid or mucus from building up in your lungs, and make it easier for you to breathe.

## How do you use an incentive spirometer?

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When you use an incentive spirometer, you'll breathe in air through a tube that is connected to a large air column containing a piston or ball. As you breathe in, the piston or ball inside the column moves up. The height of the piston or ball shows how much air you breathed in.

You may feel lightheaded when you breathe in deeply for this exercise. If you feel dizzy or like you're going to pass out, stop the exercise and rest.

You may only be able to raise the piston or ball a short distance up the column at first. As you use the spirometer, you should be able to breathe in more air over time and get back to the level that is normal for you.

## [How to use an incentive spirometer \(/health-library/abj6470#abj6470-sec\)](#)

1. Move the slider on the outside of the large column to the level that you want to reach or that your doctor recommended.
2. Sit or stand up straight, and hold the spirometer in front of you. Be sure to keep it level.
3. To start, breathe out normally. Then close your lips tightly around the mouthpiece. Make sure that you don't block the mouthpiece with your tongue.
4. Take a slow, deep breath. Breathe in as deeply as you can. As you breathe in, the piston or ball inside the large column will move up. Try to move the piston or ball as high up as you can or to the level your doctor recommended. When you can't breathe in anymore, hold your breath for 2 to 5 seconds.
5. Relax, remove the mouthpiece, and then breathe out normally. Repeat steps 1 through 5 as many times as your doctor tells you to. Then go to step 6.

6. After you've taken the recommended number of breaths, try to cough a few times. This will help loosen any mucus that has built up in your lungs. It will make it easier for you to breathe. If you just had surgery on your belly or chest, hold a pillow over your incision when you cough. This will support your belly or chest and reduce your pain. Repeat steps 1 through 6 as many times a day as your doctor tells you to.

## Write it down

Each time you do this exercise, keep track of your progress by writing down how high the piston or ball moves up the large column. This will help you and your doctor know how well your lungs are working.



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