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blood around our body more quickly; our lungs expand to take in more oxygen, and we are forced to do this more often. As we breathe in and out, especially if we are running uphill or further than we have before, it gets harder to catch that full breath. There is resistance to this caused by the exertion involved and it is this resistance that trains our

Lungs Fit *For Life*

By Sudha Hamilton

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of life - is there anything as vital to our survival? Have you ever experienced that panic inducing moment when you just cannot catch your breath, whether it's under the waves in the surf, running a race, or simply stressed by life? Not being able to breathe properly is a terrible experience, and one that marks a rapid rise in heart rate. What can we do to check the rise of these often life threatening conditions? Get fit! Yes - improving overall fitness levels through regular exercise like swimming, walking and going to the gym, can and does help many people who are prone to developing serious respiratory diseases.

What are we doing physiologically when we exercise? Well many things are occurring within our bodies when we run, swim or walk quickly. Our hearts beat faster and push more

lungs and improves our inspiratory muscle strength.

These muscles, which are directly responsible for our ability to breathe, are weakened when suffering from Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). COPD is most often exacerbated by bronchial infections and can often lead to hospitalisation if unchecked. The treatment for COPD is usually a rehabilitation program, which involves some inspiratory muscle training, and runs between 4 to 12 weeks depending on the severity of the disease. Unfortunately around 50% of hospitalised COPD patients are readmitted the following year with the same condition and many patients remain permanently symptomatic with impaired quality of life. This is due to the fact that the effects of short term rehabilitation program



inspiratory muscle training fade after 6 months.

What is involved in inspiratory muscle training (IMT)? Generally speaking a breathing device is used and this device creates resistance by means of pressurisation – making it more difficult to breathe in fully and thus building muscle tension. So in the same way we build muscles in the gym, we can do this internally for our inspiratory muscles. This means that IMT is a completely natural approach to the treatment of respiratory illness, and allows us to target the particular muscles with which we need to breathe. These devices are now available for use at home and can now provide long term IMT for the successful maintenance of conditions like COPD and the many other degrees of respiratory disease. These devices are of particular use to those who are unable to exercise their whole body because of an accident or illness. The IMT devices now available were developed by sports scientists to help athletes improve their aerobic capacity and sporting performances.

The Power Breathe Wellness device I trialled at home is a hand held portable unit and is easy to use. It has an adjustable load feature, which allows you to increase or decrease the training level. You place the mouthpiece of the unit in your mouth, holding the handle at the same time, your lips cover the outer shield to make a seal and the mouthpiece bite blocks are gripped between your upper and lower teeth. Then you breathe out as far as you can before taking a fast and forceful breath in through your mouth. Take in as much air as you can, quickly, straightening your back and expanding your chest. Repeat the process, feeling more confident about breathing in through the Power Breathe unit each

time. There is a nose clip for those who require some assistance in not breathing in through their nose. The instruction manual recommends starting with thirty breaths at level 0 before turning the dial clockwise to increase the load if you feel ready and able to. It also advises to complete 30 breaths at whatever level you feel able to twice a day – once in the morning and again in the evening.

It may feel difficult at first but as with all muscle training this is part of the journey to increased lung capacity. In my experience and if you are using the unit correctly, after four to six weeks your breathing and lungs will show increased capacity.

The really wonderful thing about this therapeutic device is that it is completely natural and that you are in control of your own training. The work that you put in directly correlates with the improvements you will experience in your ability to breathe, and thus enjoy life. This is in complete contrast to many of the medications prescribed for breathing conditions, which often have side effects and most importantly give you no feeling of being part of your own cure. Of course consultation with your GP is always recommended if you are currently on medications for respiratory illness and wish to begin training with the Power Breathe Wellness unit. Medical research has conclusively shown that IMT increases strength and reduces fatigue in those that embark upon it. If we can take back responsibility for our ability to breathe, it will be in my opinion, the beginning of a dramatic reduction in the incidence of diseases like asthma and other respiratory illnesses.



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