

What is Buteyko?

FACT SHEET prepared by the Asthma Foundation

The Buteyko Method or the Buteyko Breathing Technique was first developed in Russia in the 1950's by Professor Buteyko and has been adopted by many practitioners around the world. It is a breathing technique that focuses on nasal breathing, breath holding and relaxation.

The main concept behind Buteyko is that people with asthma tend to breathe more deeply and more rapidly (hyperventilate) than they need to. Buteyko teaches clients through a series of breathing exercises how to breathe less deeply and less rapidly. Breathing through the nose is encouraged. Life long practice of this technique is recommended.

From a scientific point of view, the theory that increasing the carbon dioxide level in the blood could improve asthma is somewhat tenuous and not substantiated by good physiological research. Asthma is an inflammatory condition of the airways, which causes shortness of breath, wheeze and cough rather than a disorder of breathing technique or problems in the breathing control centre.

However, many people with asthma may develop an abnormal breathing pattern, which may increase their symptoms of breathlessness. The Buteyko technique may help to reduce these symptoms. Several research studies have evaluated the Buteyko technique and the results do show some benefits.

In a study, published by Bowler et al the Buteyko method was compared with traditional asthma education and general breathing exercises. In both groups the participants were encouraged to use their reliever (beta-agonist) only when asthma symptoms were present. Inhaled preventer (corticosteroid) medicines were gradually reduced if the patient remained stable. Thirty-nine subjects were randomised to this study (20 in the control group and 19 in the Buteyko group). Those treated with Buteyko needed their reliever inhalers less often, and there was a trend towards lower inhaled corticosteroid use.

A study, published by Cooper et al, (2003) enrolled ninety patients and compared three different breathing techniques in the management of asthma. Those completing the Buteyko treatment had an improvement in symptoms and a reduction in reliever use after six months, but there was no change in the lung function (spirometry), asthma exacerbations or dose of inhaled corticosteroids required.

In 2003 McHugh et al undertook a study, which broadly replicated the findings of Bowler et al. Nineteen participants were randomised to a group that received training in Buteyko and nineteen received traditional asthma education and relaxation techniques. Both groups showed a reduction in reliever use by six months with those in the Buteyko group also reducing their inhaled corticosteroid dose.

These studies suggest that the Buteyko method has a significant impact on people's feelings about their asthma, the use of relievers and a reduction in inhaled corticosteroid dose in some people.

However, there was no sustained improvement in lung function or other markers of asthma disease severity, but neither was there any impairment to lung function demonstrated. One of the Buteyko techniques – taping the mouth closed at night – has been shown to have no benefit on asthma control (Cooper et al 2009). It is also worth noting that Buteyko's claim that the ability to hold your breath is related to the level of carbon dioxide in the blood has been shown to be false (Courtney et al 2008).

It is important to realise that other interventions can lead to similar outcomes as demonstrated by Slader et al in 2006. Fifty-seven participants were randomised to one of two breathing techniques. Group A exercises were Buteyko-like and Group B's exercises were non-specific upper body exercises. Reliever use was decreased by 86 per cent in both groups. Quality of life, lung function and airway responsiveness were unchanged after 14 weeks. A recent study by Cowie et al (2008) found that asthma control improved just as much with breathing and relaxation advice as with Buteyko treatments, although the Buteyko group ended up on a lower dose of inhaled steroids.

The British Guideline on the Management of Asthma 2008, states that the Buteyko Method "may be considered to help patients control the symptoms of asthma". The guideline also grades clinical research on Buteyko with a 'B' classification — indicating that supporting clinical trials are available. No other complementary therapy has been endorsed by this body for the treatment of asthma.

There do not appear to be any obvious safety problems with the Buteyko technique as long as it does not replace normal asthma treatment. The advice given by Buteyko to use relievers when required and continue with preventer medication is in accordance with current medical advice.

Individuals planning to enrol in a Buteyko course would be strongly advised to discuss this with their general practitioner, especially if they are contemplating any changes to their treatment.

The Asthma Foundation can help you

The Asthma Foundation is New Zealand's not-for-profit sector authority on asthma and other respiratory illnesses. We advocate to government and raise awareness of respiratory illnesses, fund research for better treatments and educate on best practice.

Check out our comprehensive website at asthmaandrespiratory.org.nz

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