

Breathe

We do it all day, everyday from birth, yet most people don't breathe well

Why is breath so important?

In many ways this should be obvious; we need to breathe to stay alive. We can survive without food for weeks, water for days but breath for only a few minutes. Most of us assume we are doing it correctly as we are still here! However in the West it is often forgotten that your breath is your life force and good breathing is the difference between mere survival and being alive.

Did you know that over 90% of our energy should come from breathing, yet most of us access only 10-20% of our full breathing capacity? It is oxygen that allows energy to be released within the body's cells. However, most people vastly reduce their supply by only exchanging ½ a litre of air with each breath, when an adult lung capacity is 4-6 litres! This leaves us short of energy and compromises our health. Clinical studies have proven that our oxygen levels, wellness and life-span are dependent on proper breathing.

What are the consequences of not breathing well?

What is often overlooked in the importance of breathing is the fact that the lungs, as well as enabling us to uptake oxygen, are also excretory organs. As we breathe, oxygen that is inhaled purifies our blood by removing poisonous waste products circulating throughout our blood systems. As we exhale, carbon dioxide and other waste gases are removed from the body. Irregular breathing will hamper this purification process and cause waste products to remain in circulation. Digestion will then become irregular, leaving tissues and organs undernourished. Improper oxygen consumption will ultimately lead to fatigue and heightened anxiety states.

The ideal breathing rate for adults is around 6 breaths per minute, yet the average rate is 12-14 times a minute. In fact, many of us, without knowing it, habitually 'hyperventilate', that is, we take quick, shallow breaths from the top of our chest. When this kind of breathing occurs our body will experience a shortage of oxygen that activates our 'fight or flight reflex', which makes us, tense, anxious, and irritable.

In short poor breathing leads to:

- higher anxiety
- greater toxicity
- poorer health
- general fatigue
- slower metabolism
- inability to deal with stress
- poorer concentration
- premature aging

How do we breathe well?

First of all we need to exhale! In the West we tend to focus on the inbreath more than the outbreath, when in fact, they have equal importance. One must start with the exhalation as we cannot fill our lungs with fresh air until the stale air has been exhaled. When we breathe shallowly, only 10% of the air is exchanged, meaning that we keep our lungs 90% full of stale air!

Method:

At the end of an exhalation, use the abdominal muscles to expel a bit more breath. Then relax and you will find the inbreath comes naturally.

To maximise your inbreath, you need to fill from the bottom up. Allow the first part of the breath to fill the diaphragm, which swells the abdomen, then breathe into the rib cage, which should expand sideways. Finally the last part of the breath should raise the collar bones.

When the lungs are completely filled, breathe out, in the reverse sequence to inhaling.

Throughout this process, the air should enter and exit in a continuous flow, without gasping. You should not hear yourself breathing, if you can then it probably means that you are breathing too quickly. Breathe easily without straining. Remember that ideal respiration is deep, slow, silent and easy.

At first this method will probably feel unnatural but you will become more accustomed to it with practise, which can be done at any time of day. Breathe consciously, and as completely as possible. Gradually your habitual method of breathing will improve. It is highly recommended that you reserve a few minutes every day to practise, at a particular time convenient to you. Whenever you feel tired, depressed or discouraged do a few complete breathing exercises and you should feel more alert and energised.

Summary:

- Empty the lungs entirely.
- Slowly lower the diaphragm allowing air to enter the bottom part of the lungs, swelling the abdomen.
- Breathe into the rib cage without straining.
- Allow the lungs to completely fill by raising the collar-bones.
- Exhale in the reverse order.

What are the benefits of breathing properly?

Slow, deep breathing is used by the world's great spiritual traditions in practices such as meditation, mantras, prayer, chant, qigong, tai chi, yoga and so on. It has long been understood that proper breathing has a multitude of benefits for your mental, emotional and physical well-being:

- Higher energy levels
- Greater health
- Less tension
- Fewer illnesses
- Higher metabolism
- Less heart strain
- Better concentration
- Calmer state of mind

Tip

Do not allow yourself to become breathless when exercising. When you become breathless, your workout is no longer aerobic, it is, or is about to become, anaerobic, which means that it is proceeding without oxygen and you are no longer burning fat for fuel. You should be able to speak comfortably, without gasping whilst exercising. One way of preventing breathlessness is to only breathe through the nose. This may slow you down initially but will lead to a much greater performance in the long term.