

DEEP BREATHING

A Relaxation Technique That May Provide Health Benefits

Like most people, you probably take breathing for granted. You breathe automatically, and it doesn't require much thought as you go about your busy day. You also may not give much thought to how breathing affects your health. But it does.

Deep or relaxed breathing, beneficial because of its quick, calming effect, can help you reduce the effects of stress on your health. It can also help you to remain alert, energetic and productive. In addition, relaxed breathing may help if you have headaches, anxiety, high blood pressure or difficulty sleeping.

Take a breath

Breathing gets oxygen into your body and brain when you inhale and gets carbon dioxide out of your body when you exhale. Your brain automatically controls breathing, including the size and frequency of each breath, based on signals from sensors in the lungs.

Your lungs have no muscles of their own for breathing. Instead, the diaphragm is the major muscle of breathing. It's a dome-shaped muscle that separates the chest cavity from the abdominal cavity and forms a flexible, moving floor for the lungs. It stretches from the backbone to the front of the rib cage.

When you inhale, the diaphragm flattens downward, creating more space in the chest cavity for the lungs to fill. When you exhale, the diaphragm relaxes and returns to its dome shape. The average person breathes in and out about 12 to 20 times a minute. Although the diaphragm functions automatically, its movements can be controlled, which is one way you can relax.

Breathe easy

Different methods of breathing involve movement of different areas of the trunk. Most people breathe by expanding and contracting their chests (chest breathing). Abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing, which involves a slight in-and-out movement of the abdomen, is a good method for breathing and relaxation because it allows for the most efficient exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide with the least amount of effort.

Infants and children usually use diaphragmatic breathing. Adults, however, often change their breathing patterns, usually

as an adaptation to stress. When stressed, many adults use their chest muscles for breathing.

Relax, two, three, four

Relaxed breathing is a skill you can learn. The goals of relaxed breathing are to slow breathing and to reduce the use of shoulder, neck and upper chest muscles so you breathe more efficiently.

You can use relaxed breathing anytime, such as before and during stressful situations. Avoid caffeine and nicotine for at least 1 hour before using relaxed breathing. They interfere with your relaxation efforts.

Practice relaxed breathing throughout the day until it becomes natural for you. Use this technique when you're anxious or short of breath. To do relaxed breathing:

- Sit in a chair with your feet on the floor, or lie down. Your spine should be straight and your arms and legs uncrossed and relaxed.
- Breathe in deeply. Pause before you exhale.
- As you exhale, count "1" to yourself and imagine your body becoming relaxed.
- Continue to inhale and exhale, counting each exhalation as "2," "3" and "4."
- Repeat your inhalation and exhalation in sets of four for 5 to 10 minutes at a comfortable pace.
- During this exercise, your breathing should gradually slow as your body relaxes.

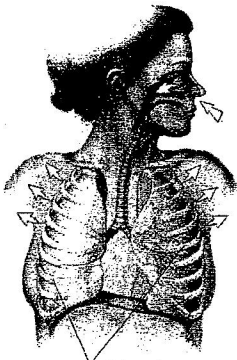
Pursed-lip breathing

An easy and effective method to control your breathing when relaxing is pursed-lip breathing. It helps to empty air from your lungs as you exhale.

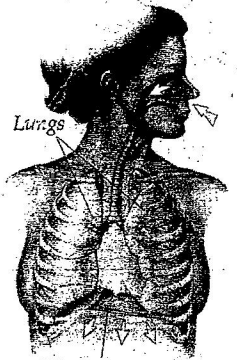
Purse your lips as you exhale, that is, with your lips puckered — the flow of air should make a soft *sssss* or *whhhh* sound. Inhale deeply through your nose and exhale through your mouth. The more air you breathe out, the more fresh air you can breathe in. Increasing your intake of fresh air will help you breathe better in almost any situation.

Deep breaths now

It's hard to imagine that you can gain so much from relaxed breathing. But it's an effective way to cope with tension and stress. So next time you need to relax, take a deep breath. ■



Ribs cage
Chest breathing



Diaphragm
Diaphragmatic breathing

There are two primary methods of breathing, chest breathing and diaphragmatic breathing. Most adults breathe shallowly by expanding their chests. This may be an adaptation to stress. Infants and children usually use diaphragmatic breathing, which allows for the most effective exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide with the least amount of effort.