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The Breathing Solution

You're about to learn the easiest route to a happier, healthier existence.

By *Tori Rodriguez*

It's crazy to think you could be messing up something you do some 20,000 times a day: inhaling and exhaling. Well, maybe not so much "messaging up" as not doing it as efficiently and effectively as you could be.

"When done well, breathing can regulate and revitalize your body, your energy levels, and

your mind," says Isaac Eliaz, M.D., director of the Amitabha Medical Clinic and Healing Center in Sebastopol, California. Most people, however, suck in the bare minimum with each inhalation, filling their lungs with half a liter of air (your full lung capacity is at least five to six liters!) and depriving their organs of the O₂ they need for peak performance.

The remedy, however, isn't just to gulp more air. The secret to most kinds of beneficial deep breathing—including the diaphragmatic, abdominal, and pranayama varieties—lies in longer, fuller exhalations, which rid your body of carbon dioxide and free up lots of extra space for when you do inhale. Keeping that in mind, read on to reap

the many healthy rewards of the almighty breath.

A Stronger Immune System

Deep breathing can build your defenses because of something pretty basic: its relaxation effect. "When you decrease tension and stress, you curb the release of hormones and chemicals that can be detrimental to immune function," says Duck-Hee Kang, Ph.D., R.N., of the University of Texas School of Nursing at Houston.

Find Your Breath:

- ▶ Sit or lie in a comfortable position, keeping your legs and spine straight. Place one hand on your abdomen and one on your chest.
- ▶ Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose and into



NOSE VS. MOUTH

There's no single "right" way to breathe. Generally, though, try to get air through your schnoz, which filters out dirt and bacteria. (Yes, nose hairs are good for something!) Nasal passages also moisten air, making it easier on your lungs. Try to breathe through your mouth only when you are exercising and need to take in large amounts of oxygen at once.

your abdomen until your lungs are full. Pause for a few seconds, then exhale slowly through the mouth, making a quiet whooshing sound, until your lungs are empty. Repeat.

- ▶ Focus exclusively on the sound and feeling of your breaths for five to 10 minutes. (Once you get the hang of it, you can work up to 20 minutes.) The key, says Kang, is consistency: Try it once a day, three or four times a week, and keep it up for at least several months.

Less Anxiety

It turns out that the way we breathe has a strong effect on our feelings of fear. It's a vicious circle, really: When we're anxious, we tend to take short, shallow breaths, robbing the body of oxygen—

and when we take rapid breaths, we're more likely to gasp for air and feel panicky. Long-exhalation breathing may signal the nervous system to slow down, lowering your heart rate and chilling you out.

Find Your Breath:

- ▶ Stand, sit, or lie down, keeping your spine straight.
- ▶ Breathe in for three to five seconds through your nose. Then breathe out very slowly and evenly through your nose, taking twice as long to exhale (six to 10 seconds). Repeat.
- ▶ You don't need to breathe into your belly or hold your breath between inhales and exhales, and there's no need to wait until your lungs are completely empty to inhale again. Just follow the timing and try to practice daily for five to 15 minutes.

Just one 20-minute session can raise levels of the "happy hormone" serotonin.

Better Blood-Sugar Control

In a recent study, people who practiced diaphragmatic breathing for 40 minutes after wolfing down a high-cal, high-carb meal were able to offset many of the energy-zapping effects of over-indulging (including eventual diabetes risk). Turns out, deep breathing can stimulate the production of insulin, which lowers blood-sugar levels; with more time, it can also nix extra cortisol (a stress hormone) and harmful free radicals, according to *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*.

Find Your Breath:

- ▶ Ten minutes after you finish a big meal (it doesn't have to be a total pig-out!), sit comfortably in a quiet place, resting one hand on your stomach.
- ▶ Breathe into your belly through your nose for about three seconds. Make sure you can feel your stomach expanding. Breathe out through your nose for three seconds. Repeat.
- ▶ To get the full effect, keep at it for at least 30 minutes.

An Enhanced Attention Span

Make like a Zen monk and combine deep breathing with mindful breathing (the kind used in meditation) to help you focus. A 2011 study found that just one 20-minute session could increase the flow of oxygenated blood to your brain, ramping up activity in the prefrontal cortex, the area associated with concentration. Bonus: This type of breathing also raises levels of the "happy hormone" serotonin, which can help ease symptoms of depression.

Find Your Breath:

- ▶ Sit comfortably in a quiet, dimly lit room. Close your eyes and relax.
- ▶ Inhale slowly through your nose for six to eight seconds. Focus on the sound of your breath and on breathing deeply into your lower abdomen.
- ▶ Exhale through your nose for nine to 12 seconds. Contract your abdominal muscles as you breathe out. Repeat.
- ▶ Your goal is around three or four breaths per minute. Work up to super-beneficial 20-minute intervals.

Amped-Up Heart Health

If, when you're seriously stressed, you can feel your heart rate increasing, consider pranayama your new best friend. The yoga-based breathing method ensures you're taking in enough oxygen and leads to lowered blood pressure in just two weeks, according to a study in *Heart Views*. Ideally, you'd practice for around 40 minutes a day, says study author Anita Herur, M.D. Realistically, though, you can try the breathing steps below whenever you have time.

Find Your Breath:

- ▶ Sit or lie in a quiet place.
- ▶ Breathe deeply through your nose for five seconds, then exhale through your nose for five seconds. Repeat this pattern for 10 minutes.
- ▶ Hold your left nostril closed and follow the above breathing pattern, using only your right nostril. Repeat for 10 minutes, then switch nostrils.
- ▶ Continue the breathing pattern, but this time alternate nostrils: Inhale deeply through your right and exhale through your left. Inhale through your left, then exhale through your right, and so on. Repeat the pattern for 10 minutes. ■

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