

HealthFirst

A public-service newsletter of the **Lions HealthFirst Foundation**



Breathe Easy...

How often do you think about breathing? Most people don't; they assume that breathing is an "automatic" activity and will take care of itself. It is true that the body will make sure to take its next breath, but awareness of it or "conscious breathing" can benefit every aspect of our health in more ways than one.

Many of your health concerns can be connected to how you breathe. After all, it is the mechanism that provides every cell in your body with life-giving oxygen. When your ability to breathe properly is compromised, you can expect some physical problems to develop.

In spite of the fact that breathing is an automatic function of the body, many people don't breathe as nature intended. Often, because of mental stress or physiological distress, this natural breathing process is compromised, and they begin to breathe incorrectly. In due time this incorrect breathing becomes a habit.

One of the most common habits is shallow breathing—breathing that focuses in the upper lungs and uses the muscles in the neck and upper chest area. In their book *Breathe In, Breathe Out*, authors Drs. Lochr and Migdow state, "Research has shown that slowing down and deepening our breath shifts us from the stress response to the relaxation response; this slows the heart, normalizes blood pressure, increases blood flow to the digestive system, deepens sleep, increases energy, focus, concentration, and memory—optimal breathing not only helps prevent or cure disease, it raises performance levels in school and sports." That's a pretty good list of benefits for just making sure that you're breathing properly!

Research has proven that deep abdominal breathing is the most efficient means of oxygenating the blood. It is also shown to release endorphins, which is the body's natural pain suppressors, bringing about a state of relaxation and general well-being.

Breathing properly involves more of our body than we may realize. Tension in any area of our body can make it difficult to breathe right. Here's a quick and easy experiment to prove this:

Take a slow, deep breath while tightening the muscles in your feet or your hips. Now, relax those muscles; then take a deep, slow breath again. You should notice quite a difference in the quality and ease of your breathing.

Why does abdominal (deep) breathing provide you with all these health advantages? Due to gravity, the lower portion of your lungs has a higher rate of blood flow. So your lungs and heart don't have to work as hard and your circulatory system profits from this efficient means of oxygenating the blood. Deep, slow breathing is shown to release endorphins (the body's natural pain suppressors) that bring about a feeling of relaxation and general well-being—a benefit you also get from massage.

Exercising regularly can help facilitate correct breathing by relaxing the muscles. In turn correct breathing can help prevent tension build-up in the muscles. We can't emphasize enough the mutually beneficial relationship of exercise and breathing right. We would feel much better with fewer physical complaints if we did both regularly.

As you incorporate better breathing into your lifestyle, try to do what you can to get as much fresh air as possible. In today's society, with so many forms of air pollution, this can be a challenge. Your body will benefit from your efforts!

Physical Exercise and Deep Breathing

Learning to breathe more naturally can benefit your health and well-being. Exercise can help you breathe easier and more efficiently.

Shallow breathing can lead to muscle dysfunction in several areas of your body, such as the neck and upper chest.

continued on back



Your regular exercise sessions can help to relax and normalize muscles throughout your body that can facilitate improved breathing. And in turn, your adoption of better breathing techniques can help to prevent a build-up of tension that leads to tight muscles, etc. When you maintain a regular schedule for exercise, you will probably notice you feel much better on a day-to-day basis and experience fewer recurring physical complaints.

You can strengthen your results by including slow stretching in your regimen.

Try this breathing technique from *Breathe In, Breathe Out...*

Abdominal Breath: Natural Breath

1. Lie on your back or stand or sit comfortably and place your hands on your abdomen.
2. Inhale slowly and deeply, letting your abdomen expand like a balloon.
3. Let the abdomen fall as you exhale slowly, releasing old, stale air.
4. Inhale easily. Feel your tummy expand again.
5. Press the air out as you contract, as you pull in your abdomen while exhaling.

Repeat this exercise as often as you can; you will soon realize that deep abdominal breathing has become natural to you.

References: *Mosby's Fundamentals of Therapeutic Massage: Breathe in, Breathe Out*, © 1999

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