

Better

Exercises to improve
your natural breath.

by Phyllis Pilgrim

Breathing

1. Cleansing Breath

Purpose: to clear stale air out of the lungs which may be a result of shallow breathing.

Exercise: Sit in a chair or stand. Place hands on hips, elbows out. Take in a deep breath, then exhale. Continue to exhale (out, out, out) to empty lungs as you bend forward slightly from hips. Pull in your abdominals to push out all the air. Breathe in again while straightening the spine into an upright position. Repeat 3 times.

2. Complete Breath

Purpose: to expand lungs to their fullest capacity.

Exercise: Sit or stand, exhaling as much air as possible through your mouth. It is important to pull ribcage into the body laterally. Then inhale through the nostrils, sniffing in more and more air until lungs are as full as possible, expanding ribcage sideways and lifting chest. Exhale slowly through mouth and nose to normalize breath. One time.

3. Ribcage Breathing

Purpose: to ensure breathing into bottom of lungs and offset shallow breathing.

Exercise: Place hands on lower sides of ribcage. Think of your floating ribs as moving out sideways (laterally), like bucket handles when you breathe. Avoid hunching shoulders. Exhale, pulling your ribs in laterally, narrowing your ribcage. Take small breaths, putting air into the bottom of your lungs, widening and narrowing your ribcage as you breathe slowly and rhythmically. Repeat 12 or more times.

4. Breath of Fire — an Energizing Breath

Purpose: to stimulate brain by fully oxygenating it to bring new energy to the body.

Exercise: Slowly breathe in through nostrils, ballooning out abdominal muscles, making a big belly. Then sharply exhale through nostrils, snapping abdominals in towards spine. Gradually speed up to a fast inhale/exhale rhythm for 10 seconds at a stretch, moving abdominals out and in, synchronizing with the breath. Rest for a few breaths, then repeat (up to 6 times). You may wish to gradually increase your fast-breathing sessions from 10 seconds up to 30 seconds. Whatever your level, stop if you feel dizzy, and take slow, deep breaths instead. This is not an easy exercise. Be sure to maintain proper spinal alignment.

5. Alternate Nostril Breathing

Purpose: to relax and slow down brain wave patterns.

Helps with insomnia or to control stress.

Exercise: This is a slow complete breath done through one nostril at a time, alternating nostril breathing as follows. Sit in a comfortable position, spine upright. Breathe out, emptying the lungs. Close left nostril with left finger, pressing gently. Inhale a full, complete breath through the right nostril. Now close the right nostril, releasing the left nostril, and exhale all the air slowly with control. When lungs are empty, breathe in through the same (left) nostril until lungs are completely full, close the left nostril and exhale through right nostril until lungs are completely empty. This completes one round of alternate nostril breathing. Repeat 6 to 8 times. The slower you are able to breathe, making no sound, but filtering the air in and out silently, maintaining control and focus, the greater the benefit to relax body and mind.

6. Aerobic Exercise

Aerobics means working (exercising) with oxygen; timing your movements to your breathing, using your diaphragm and intercostal muscles to pull air into the bottom of the lungs. (See # 3—"Ribcage Breathing.") It is important to *pace yourself* so that you can access sufficient air to support your exercise, and *keep going without stopping*. Favoring your diaphragm as a muscle provides the necessary oxygen to prevent it from spasming. (A spasm in your diaphragm muscle feels like a "stitch" in your side.) Creating a rhythm to your breathing in time with your movement will help keep air flowing evenly through your lungs. Breathing only through your nostrils gives an added benefit to the brain. This may be difficult at first, but can be accomplished with training and practice.

7. Preferred Ways to Breathe During Aerobic Activity:

1. In through the nose, out through the nose.
2. In through the nose, out through the mouth.
3. In through the mouth, out through the mouth, as a last resort.

8. Strength Training—Lifting Heavy Weights or Doing Very Hard Work

Exhale on the effort. This will avoid the "val Salva" effect, where holding your breath while exerting hard effort could cause you to black out. When in doubt, keep breathing! NEVER hold your breath while exercising.

9. Stretching

Remember to breathe out in a soft way (like a sigh of relief) to help relax while stretching muscles. Lengthen muscles gently and slowly as you exhale, breathing into the stretch. As soon as you feel tension, stop and breathe, using your exhalations to relax and "let go," to improve the stretch a fraction more. Never stretch aggressively. Stretch while your body is warm: The best time is after vigorous exercise, such as a brisk walk or mountain hike.

10. To Relax and Release Stress

Stand (or sit if possible), take a slow deep breath in. Slowly exhale to the count of ten, relaxing your muscles as you exhale. Feel tension draining with the breath. Repeat 3 times.