

Presented by Deanna Reiter, MA Co-founder/Director Qi Breathing, at the November 2021 PEBB webinar, "Improving Health Through Breathing"

Breathing Exercises

Pick one of the following breathing exercises to do for a minimum of 1-2 minutes daily. These breathing exercises should never cause tension, pain, numbness or tingling. If any negative side effects occur, such as dizziness or lightheadedness, return to normal breathing patterns and attempt these breathing exercises at a later time. These exercises are not meant to replace medical interventions by a physician.

Belly Breathing

Stand or lie down comfortably on your back with your knees bent and feet on the floor. Place one or both of your hands on your belly. Begin by exhaling slowly and deeply, letting as much air out as possible without creating any tension in your body. Feel the contraction of the abdomen. Then inhale deeply and slowly. Feel the expansion of the abdomen.

Initially, spend five minutes three times daily engaging the diaphragm with this exercise. Easy times to remember to do this exercise are when you wake up and when you go to bed. As you get familiar with engaging the diaphragm by expanding and contracting the belly, you can do this exercise seated or standing. To increase the effort of the exercise, while lying down, place a book on the belly and feel it raise and lower with the breath.

This exercise helps to strengthen the diaphragm muscle as well as to teach correct use of the diaphragm. Through regular practice of Belly Breathing, the respiration rate can be slowed and the effort and energy required to breathe will be minimized.

Strengthening the Diaphragm (adapted from The Breathing Book by Donna Farhi)

The diaphragm is a muscle and needs to be worked like any other muscle.

Lie on a firm surface, such as the floor. You can lie on carpet, a blanket or yoga mat.

Bend your knees and keep your feet on the floor. This will be more comfortable for your lower back.

Rest your arms out to your sides comfortably.

Place a 10-pound sandbag (or something similar like a bag of rice) lengthwise across the base of your ribs. It will cover the area from the middle ribs to the middle of your abdomen above your navel.

After taking a few minutes to relax, direct your breathing to the area underneath the sandbag. You don't want to push the sandbag using your muscles; you want to feel the contact between the sandbag and your mid-torso. Concentrate your efforts for 10 breaths and then rest, allowing your breath to happen without effort. You're basically lifting weights with your diaphragm muscle.

Repeat for another 2 sets of 10 breaths, resting in between each set.

When you're done, remove the sandbag and observe your breathing.

A variation for those who are unable to get on the floor involves sitting in a chair and putting both hands on either side of your lower ribs. With your thumbs wrapped around to the back and your fingers facing forward lightly press into your rib bones, not the space between the ribs. Direct your breath down into your belly and into your ribs and feel them expand out to the sides into your hands as you inhale. With each breath the fingers will naturally move away from one other and with each exhale the hands and fingers will come together, with the rib cage moving like an accordion. It's subtle, but by noticing the way your body moves and feels when you use the diaphragm to breathe properly, you'll find it becomes easier and unconscious. You'll also notice if you start to revert back to shallow, chest breathing.

In addition to strengthening the diaphragm these exercises you will help you become more aware of your diaphragm's movement as you breathe.

Box Breathing (Square Breathing)

Sitting in a comfortable position, begin by exhaling through the nose for 4 seconds. Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Inhale through the nose for 4 seconds. Hold your breath for 4 seconds. Exhale through the nose for 4 seconds. Ideally, complete four cycles of Box Breathing. This exercise can help to regulate the autonomic nervous system and help to reduce stress and improve your mood.

Alternate Nostril Breathing (Nadi Shodhana)

Sit comfortably. Place the left hand on the left knee with the palm facing upward. Use the right thumb to close off the right nostril. (The right index and middle finger can be tucked in toward the palm or the pads of the fingers can touch the midpoint between the eyebrows.) Inhale as fully as you can through the left nostril. Pinch the left nostril with the right ring finger. Exhale completely through the right nostril. Then inhale deeply through the right nostril. Pinch the right nostril and exhale through the left nostril. Do two or more cycles alternating breathing through each nostril.

Alternate Nostril Breathing can help improve concentration, clarity and emotional stability, improve sleep, calm the nervous system and prepare the body and mind for meditation.

If you have a deviated septum, sinus or allergy issues that involves complete blocking of one or both nostrils, avoid this breathing exercise.

Extended Exhalation Breathing

As the name suggests, you will exhale for a longer duration than you inhale. Typically, Extended Exhalation Breathing will be twice as long as the inhalation. For example: Inhale for four seconds through the nose. Exhale for eight seconds through the nose. Continue for several rounds.

Shorten the exhalation if you cannot breathe out for the full amount of time.

Extending the exhalation can help you to relax more deeply and release tension. It can be practiced at any time of day to reduce anxiety. If you experience insomnia or sleep disturbances, practicing Extended Exhalation Breathing in bed at night can aid falling asleep.