

# Abdominal breathing

## Breathing

Breathing is one of the most important and vital acts we do. Our breathing alters in pattern and rhythm at different times of the day and in different emotional states, for example sighing in despair, panting with exhaustion, holding our breath in fear and terror.

Breathing is one of the few bodily processes that can either be voluntary or involuntary. Breathing can take place automatically **without thinking about it**, or we can alter it consciously and at will. Because of this unique relationship between our thinking and bodily processes, our breathing pattern can play a deciding role in how much we are affected by stress.

## Using breathing to control stress

Breathing is one of the most sensitive indicators or warning signs of stress, because it is such a vital link between our minds and bodies. By consciously increasing our awareness about breathing and by practising breathing exercises it is possible to:

- improve our sense of well-being
- decrease our level of stress
- help to bring about interconnectedness between our minds and bodies.

# Types of breathing

There are two main types of breathing:

- chest breathing
- abdominal (or diaphragmatic) breathing.

## Chest breathing

This type of breathing is characterised by an upward and outward movement of the chest and is found most commonly during vigorous exercise, or emergency situations.

If we constantly use chest breathing, it can make the body tense, as if it is under stress. This is because the activated upper chest muscles increase feelings of anxiety.

## Abdominal (or diaphragmatic) breathing

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle, which separates our chest and abdomen. When we breathe **in** the diaphragm tightens, flattens and moves down, sucking air into the lungs. As the diaphragm moves down, it pushes the abdominal contents down, which forces the abdominal wall **out**. When we breathe out the diaphragm relaxes, air passes out of the lungs and the abdominal wall flattens. This type of breathing has two important effects on the body:

- A. It is in itself relaxing compared to the 'emergency mode' breathing of the upper chest, which is an integral part of 'fight or flight' response to a stressful situation (see the Stress management leaflet for more information).
  
- B. It is typical of the regenerating processes such as when you are asleep, digesting food or the body is at peace. You can see it in the way babies and children breathe.

Abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing is the most efficient and relaxed way of getting enough air into your lungs. Breathing too quickly, too deeply or irregularly can result in unpleasant symptoms such as dizziness, faintness, headache, visual disturbance, tingling, chest pain, palpitations, sighing, yawning and excessive sniffing. It can commonly become a cause of anxiety.

## Abdominal (diaphragmatic) breathing exercises

Find a quiet room where you will be undisturbed for about 10–15 minutes.

1. Lie down on the bed or floor with a pillow under your knees. Undo tight clothing and remove your shoes. Spend a few moments settling yourself down.
2. Close your eyes, spread your feet 12–18 inches apart, and check that your head, neck and spine are in a straight line.
3. Focus your attention on your breathing. Do not try to change your breathing for the moment. Become aware of how fast or slow you are breathing, whether you are breathing with your chest or diaphragm. Notice whether there are any gaps or pauses between your inhalation or exhalation.
4. Now, put one hand on your upper chest, and one hand on your abdomen just below your rib cage. Relax the shoulders and hands. As you breathe in, allow the abdomen to rise, and as you breathe out, allow the abdomen to flatten. There should be little or no movement in the chest.

5. Allow yourself a little time to get into a regular rhythm. It may help to imagine that as you are breathing in, you draw half a circle with your breath around your body, and as you breathe out, you complete the other half of the circle. Allow your breath to become smooth, easy and regular.
6. Now, slow down your breathing out, then be conscious of a comfortable pause before allowing your breaths in to follow smoothly and easily. If any distractions, thoughts or worries come into your mind, allow them to come, then allow them to go, and bring your attention back to your breathing.
7. When you are ready to end this exercise, take a few deeper breaths in. Bring some feeling back into your fingers and toes. Open your eyes slowly, and turn over onto one side before gently sitting up.



## Contact us

For further information about any of the issues raised in this leaflet, please contact **occupational therapy** on 020 7188 4180, Monday to Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm or the **cardiovascular rehabilitation team** on 020 7188 0946, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.

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**t:** 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas' **t:** 020 7188 8803 at Guy's **e:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk)

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