

Breathing exercises

The following exercises are set in stages to gradually master the technique of diaphragm breathing, increasing the capacity and control of breath.

- Ideally exercises should be done 2-3 times a week
- Find a quiet, comfortable space and ensure that you will not be disturbed during the exercises
- Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth
- Do not sit straight up after these exercises. Roll onto your side first and rest for a few seconds before raising yourself
- You may feel tired or slightly light-headed after these exercises. This is normal for people new to diaphragm breathing and will pass as you become more practiced

Diaphragm breathing

Stage 1 – breathing from the diaphragm instead of the chest

- Lay flat on your back
 - Make yourself comfortable: support your head and bend your knees if necessary
- Place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach
- Focus on breathing into your stomach so that the hand on your stomach moves as you breathe in and your hand on your chest remains still
 - Concentrate on relaxing and breathing into the stomach
 - Keep the breath natural - don't try to elongate or hold the breath
 - Visualise the breath going in through the nose and down through the throat into the stomach. Don't let the breath go up into the head
- Stop if you become frustrated at not being able to do it and come back to it at another time. You will get there with practice and some people take more time than others
- Regularly check that you are expanding your stomach on an in-breath not an out-breath as can sometimes happen when new to this form of breathing
- Once you can comfortably complete 10 cycles, move onto stage 2

Stage 2 - diaphragm breathing when upright

- Find somewhere to sit or stand comfortably
- As in stage 1, place one hand on your chest and one on your stomach, and focus on breathing into your stomach so that the hand on your stomach moves as you breathe in and your hand on your chest remains still
- When you are in the rhythm, drop your hands and continue for a few cycles
- As you become more practiced, you will no longer need your hands to remind you
- Try to allocate regular practice sessions for this breathing at work, such as when reading emails, waiting in the cafe queue, sitting on the train etc

Increasing capacity

Stage 1 - Expanding the lungs

- Lie comfortably flat on your back with one hand on your chest and one on your stomach
- Focus on breathing into your stomach as before but gradually reduce the rate of breathing by taking in more air and expanding the stomach further
 - The aim is not to fill yourself to bursting straight away but to gradually increase the capacity of your breathing
 - It can help if you count your in-breath and aim for a slow count of 5
 - Keep the inward and outward breaths relaxed and controlled and don't hold the breath

- Repeat for 10 cycles and then stop
- Revisit the exercise until you can complete 10 cycles at a slow count of 5 then move onto stage 2

Stage 2 - Expanding into the top of the lungs

- Again lie comfortably flat on your back - this time with your hands relaxed by your side
- Breathe into your stomach as before
- Hold the breath for a beat and then expand the inward breath up into the chest. You will not only feel this expansion at the front of the body but at the sides and back as well
- Gently exhale
- Repeat for 10 cycles and then stop

Breath control to slow heart rate

Stage 1 - Elongating the out breath to slow your heart rate

- When we are anxious/stressed/nervous/excited, our heart rate can increase and breathing can be used to return your heart rate to a relaxed state
- Find somewhere to stand or sit quietly prior to performance and concentrate on your diaphragm breathing for a few cycles to prepare the breath
- Then slowly increase the out-breath so that you are expelling all the air from your lungs
- Once your lungs are completely empty, naturally let air flow back into the lungs rather than pulling the air in with the diaphragm. Your stomach should only return to a relaxed state, rather than being pushed out.
- Repeat the long out-breath and shallow in-breath for a few cycles and observe your heart rate decreasing
- Your heart rate should decrease after only 3-5 cycles. If it is still elevated after 5 cycles, return the breathing to normal for 5 cycles before trying again
- When the heart rate has returned to a more relaxed pace, return the breathing to normal for 5 cycles or more before moving and then move cautiously at first in case of any dizziness