

# Conscious Breathing 101 for Health & Relaxation

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## How Your Diaphragm Works

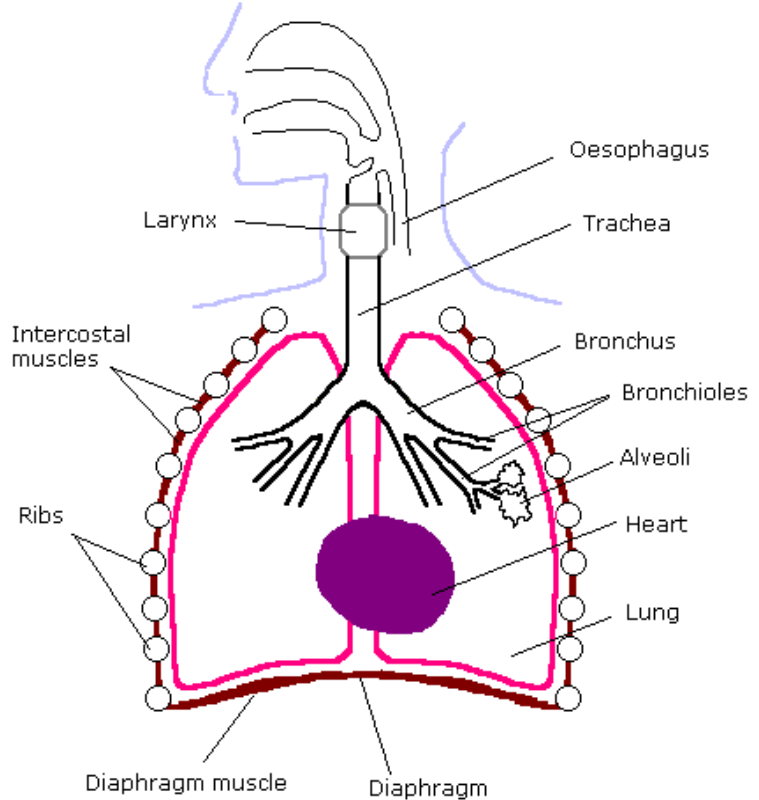
Breathing into your belly with your diaphragm is about 10 times more efficient than just breathing into your upper chest. This means taking in more oxygen and eliminating more toxins, which is a very good thing.

Oxygen supports our immune system and helps keep bacteria and viruses in check. Some doctors have said that low oxygen levels lead to an increased risk of cancer. Oxygen also helps us think more clearly, and who couldn't use more of that these days?

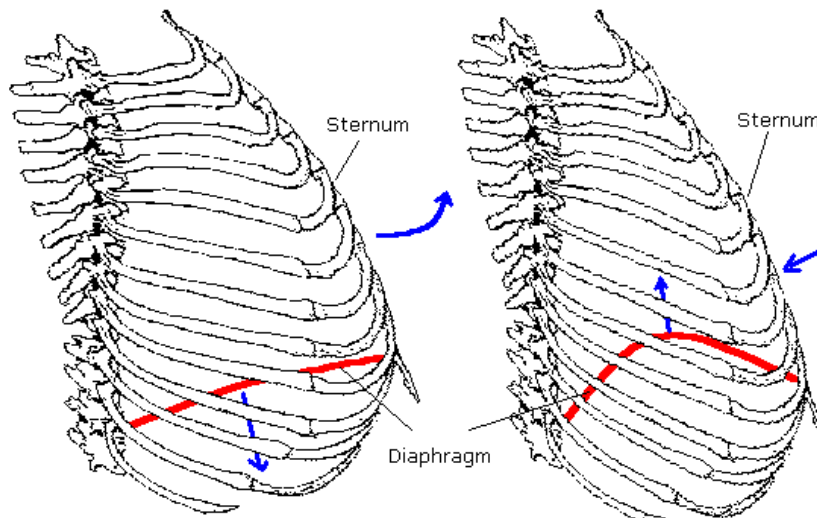
Your diaphragm is a dome-shaped layer of muscle which attaches to your lower rib cage all the way around, front and back. Your lungs and heart are directly above, and your liver, stomach, spleen and pancreas lie directly underneath. Your intestines and kidneys are lower down.

When your diaphragm contracts, its "dome" flattens out and pushes down on the organs in your abdomen. At the same time, this movement creates a vacuum in your lungs which draws fresh air in. You can also breathe in by contracting special muscle groups attached to your ribs to expand your rib cage.

Schematic diagram of lungs and thorax



## Breathing in and out



The "Breathing In" drawing on the left depicts an inhalation using *both* the diaphragm and the rib cage muscles. It's here to show you the action of the diaphragm when it contracts.

(Images courtesy of Wikipedia)

Breathing in:

Sternum rotated upwards as intercostals contract. Diaphragm descends

Breathing out:

Sternum rotates downwards as intercostals relax. Diaphragm ascends.

## **Breathing can be Conscious or Unconscious**

Breathing is one of the few the bodily function that operates both consciously or unconsciously. Most of the time we use the default program in our subconscious mind to run our breathing for us, because our conscious minds are busy tending to other things.

The default program makes sure we have enough to get by, but not much more than that. For most of us, this default breathing is influenced by other subconscious programs that govern our posture (another conscious/unconscious system), and our general mental-emotional state.

Our posture and mental-emotional states are very connected. If we're feeling "down," we tend to slouch. Since it's impossible to get a good, full breath when we're slouching over, our oxygen intake will be diminished. This makes us tired, which makes us slouch more, and feel even more "down" than before. The cycle tends to feed on itself.

On the other hand, if we lift the top of our head upward, letting our body follow, we can naturally breathe easier and feel more bright, alert and hopeful. Posture and mood influence each other! Try it for yourself.

## **Benefits of Diaphragmatic Breathing**

- Breathing with your diaphragm does many good things for your mind and body.
- Stimulates the relaxation part of the nervous system
- Calms the "fight or flight part of the nervous system
- Massages the abdominal organs through movement, helping everything to function better, including your digestion and bowels
- Delivers much more oxygen to your tissues than chest breathing, and supports your immune system
- These exercises have been shown to improve general health and help to reduce high blood pressure, anxiety and depression.

*"Breathing is the first place, not the last, one should look when fatigue, disease, or other evidence of disordered energy presents itself."*

Sheldon Hendler, M.D.

## **The Practice**

Do the exercises slowly and gently, taking about 7-10 seconds for each breath cycle (in and out). When resting or engaged in light activity, focus on keeping your chest expansion to a minimum while breathing fully into your abdomen. Add chest breathing when exercising or taking deep cleansing breaths.

For learning purposes, the practice outlined below incorporates a rocking motion of the low back and pelvis, which serves two purposes:

- helps you learn how to use your diaphragm correctly for good belly breathing
- relaxes the muscles and helps you gain awareness of this part of your body

It's not necessary to use this rocking motion in your normal breathing, though you certainly can if you like (people might look at you funny, however).

## **Lying on Your Back - Preliminary**

1. Hands at your sides, with knees bent and feet flat on the floor, hip-width apart.
2. First, you'll test to feel if your diaphragm is engaging. Place your hands on the sides of your abdomen, with fingers touching the front of your belly and your thumbs touching your back . Breathe into your belly only (not your chest) and feel what happens. **If your abdomen expands to the front, back and sides as you breathe in, and your chest remains relaxed, that's perfect.** If not, remember what you've felt here, and check it again after you've finished the lying down portion of the practice – it might be better afterwards. Recheck this occasionally – it should improve as you practice. Now, for the actual exercise . . .

## Lying on Your Back – the Exercise

3. You can place your hands wherever they are most comfortable for the rest of this exercise. Breathe into your belly with your diaphragm as you gently arch your low back away from the floor.
4. As you do this, your belly moves toward the ceiling, your tail bone rocks toward the floor.
5. Relax your diaphragm and exhale as you slowly and gently flatten your low back against the floor.
6. As your back flattens, the tip of your tail bone will rock up away from the floor.
7. If you have trouble with the rocking motion, make sure that your knees are bent and your feet flat on the floor. You can also try the rocking movement without concentrating on the breathing part, until you get comfortable with the movement pattern.
8. Repeat steps 3 and 4 for a few minutes (or as long as you like). Move gently, then rest and feel the sensations in your body.

This is a nice exercise to practice before you go to sleep, or any time you feel upset (it calms the nervous system). The rocking movement naturally helps the diaphragm engage. Some people have been chest breathers for so long, they've forgotten how to use their diaphragm. If this is you, consistent practice of this little exercise should help you find it again.

## Seated

1. Sit erect, away from any backrest, with hands resting in your lap and feet flat on the floor.
2. Breathe into your belly with your diaphragm as you gently arch your low back forward.
  - As you do this, your belly moves out while you rock forward slightly on your sit-bones.
3. Relax your diaphragm and exhale from your belly as you slowly and gently flatten your low back.
  - As you do this, you will also be rocking back slightly on your sit-bones.
  - Optional: tighten your abdominal muscles slightly at the end of your exhale to help clean out the old air and make more room for the new.
4. Repeat steps two and three for a few minutes. Move gently, then rest and feel the sensations in your body.

You can practice this in public, by leaving out the rocking movements so you are not concerned about looking weird. Another place to practice (without moving your back) is when you're driving. Consciously breathing into your belly actually helps you stay present while driving, instead of spacing out into your thoughts like it's so easy to do.

## Standing

This is done in the same way as the seated version, except that you will be rocking on your hip joints instead of your sit-bones.

- Walking: just use the abdominal breathing pattern without trying to do the rocking motion.
- Running: breathe first into your belly, then fill your chest. Exhale from your chest first, then your belly, pushing the remaining air out by tightening your stomach muscles at the end. Try taking two steps for full inhalation, and two for full exhalation – you can experiment from there.

## Tips

- Tune into your breathing frequently throughout the day and notice your posture and where your breath is flowing. Note the rate, ease and depth of your breath.
- When you find yourself breathing shallowly or just into your chest, check in on your mental-emotional state, noting your stress level, emotional state, and what is going through your mind. If you don't like what you find, lift from the top of your head and practice belly breathing for a few minutes. Then make whatever appropriate changes you can, internally or externally, to make yourself more comfortable.
- Don't allow your "inner critic" to dump on you for "not doing it right!" Allow yourself plenty of time and space to integrate these new habits into your life - the old ones have probably been with you a long time!

The basic lying exercise was originally developed by Moshe Feldenkrais. I have added information from there. Refer to *Conscious Breathing*, by Gay Hendricks, Ph.D. for more advanced exercises.