



BREATHE BETTER, STRESS LESS

You take around 20,000 breaths every day without thinking about it, but did you know that the way you breathe can have a big impact on your health?

When you breathe in, you inhale oxygen, and you exhale carbon dioxide (CO₂) when you breathe out; having the right mix of these gases in your bloodstream is important. If your breathing is poor (shallow), less oxygen reaches your cells and the effects can range from poor sleep to anxiety and depression.

Having a little stress in life is vital – it's the spark that gets you out of bed in the morning and motivates you throughout the day. But constant, high levels of stress can be damaging and can affect the quality of your breathing.

This was important in our hunter-gatherer days when we had to fight for our food or take flight from a large animal that didn't want to be hunted. But thousands of years later, your body still releases the same stress hormones when you feel anxious. If you don't exercise it off or do something to calm your body and mind, anxiety can build and may cause serious health problems.

Stress can have a big impact on your breathing, too. So, for example, you might take more

anxiety and the feeling of being out of control.

GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

Shallow breathing can also alter the balance of oxygen and CO₂ in your blood; this can make you feel spaced out and can contribute to panic attacks, insomnia, dizziness and tiredness.

One of the reasons people who are having a panic attack may breathe into a paper bag is because it helps them take in exhaled CO₂, which helps to normalise gas levels.

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STRESS EFFECTS

When you are in a potentially dangerous position – one where you have to fight or take flight – your body releases large amounts of stress hormones, including adrenalin.

short, sharp breaths, which is a part of the fight or flight effect. Breathing this way for prolonged periods means you only use the top third of your lungs – it's as if you are permanently hyperventilating.

Hyperventilation raises heart rate contributing to palpitations,

DO YOU HAVE 10 MINUTES?

Practicing controlled breathing is a great way to boost mind and body health.

It also helps lower blood pressure, promotes feelings of calm and relaxation, and helps you de-stress.

So try some of the easy breathing exercises over the page; they incorporate the tried and tested ancient wisdom of yoga and can be done anywhere.

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DO YOU HAVE TEN MINUTES?

01: EQUAL BREATHING

Inhale for a count of four then exhale for a count of four all through the nose, which adds a natural resistance to the breath.

As you practice and get better at controlling your breath, aim for six to eight seconds rather than four.

Best for: Increasing focus.

02: ABDOMINAL BREATHING

Ever watched a baby breathe? The soft rise and fall of the belly is a natural way to breathe but adults forget how to breathe properly. Returning to abdominal breathing is an important way to relax.

Place your left hand on your chest and the other on your belly. Take a deep breath in through the nose, inflating your diaphragm (the large sheet-like muscle at the bottom of your chest cavity) and not your chest. Take in enough air to expand your lungs. Repeat for six to 10 deep, slow breaths per minute for 10 minutes every day.

This isn't as easy as it sounds

and may take practice. When you breathe in and out, your left hand should remain still and only your right hand should move up and down. If your left hand is moving, your breathing is too shallow and you are not inflating your diaphragm, as you should. Keep practicing; it's definitely worth it. Do this regularly for the best effects.

Best for: Deflating stress or preparing for a stressful event.

03: PROGRESSIVE RELAXATION

Close your eyes and, starting with your toes and feet, tense then relax. Move on to your calves, knees, thighs, buttocks, abdomen, chest, arms, hands, fingers, neck, jaw, forehead and eyes, all the while breathing slowly and deeply.

Try breathing in through the nose, and holding for a count of five while your muscles tense. Breathe out through the mouth as you release the tension.

Best for: When you need to de-stress at work or at home.

These wellbeing messages are brought to you by the health and wellbeing team at rt health fund – the health fund for transport and energy people.

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