

Pain Foundations

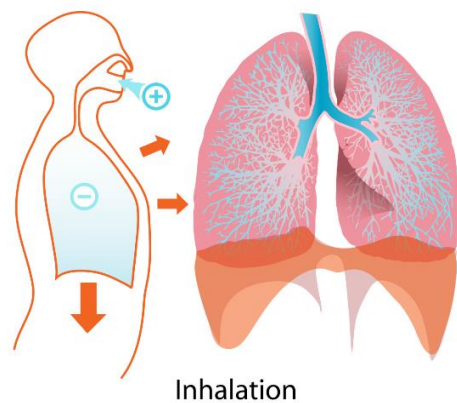
Belly Breathing

What is belly breathing?

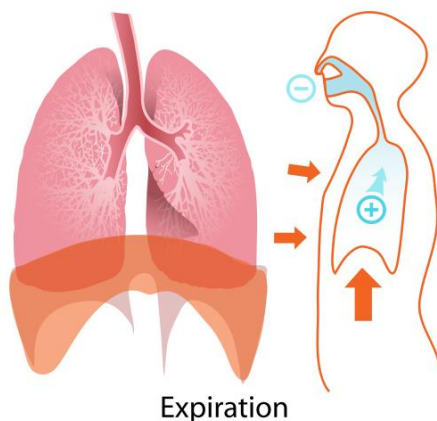
Belly breathing means breathing from your diaphragm, which is a dome-shaped muscle near the bottom of your rib cage.

Belly breathing is also called **diaphragmatic breathing** (say *dye-ah-frag-mat-ik*).

When you breathe in (inhale), your diaphragm contracts and pulls down to make space in your rib cage for your lungs to expand. Your belly expands as you breathe in. The reverse happens when you breathe out (exhale). Your diaphragm relaxes back up, and your belly and ribs move in.



Inhalation



Expiration

LadvolHats, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Chest breathing compared to belly breathing

If your diaphragm is weak, or you breathe using your chest muscles more than your belly, you might be chest breathing. When you chest breathe, you use your neck muscles to help your rib cage expand. Imagine using your neck muscles for every breath you take during the day! This can lead to neck pain.

Studies also show that a weak diaphragm can affect trunk strength and might cause low back pain.

Breathing and the nervous system

Your Autonomic Nervous System (A.N.S.) controls your breathing. This part of your nervous system controls your involuntary body functions and organs.

The A.N.S. divides into two main branches. The branches are the sympathetic (fight or flight) and parasympathetic (rest and digest). Even though most of these functions are involuntary, you can control some A.N.S. functions by doing deep breathing exercises.

Benefits of belly breathing

How you breathe can affect your nervous system and your whole body. In other words, belly breathing exercises are good for your health.

Benefits of belly breathing include helping:

- Slow your heart rate
- Lower your blood pressure
- Decrease your levels of a stress hormone called cortisol
- Increase relaxation
- Increase your energy
- Improve your immunity
- Reduce your pain

Steps to belly breathing

1. Lie on your back on a flat surface or in bed. You can use a pillow under your knees to support your spine.
2. Relax your shoulders.
3. Place one hand on your upper chest and the other just below your rib cage. This will allow you to feel your diaphragm move as you breathe.
4. Breathe in slowly through your nose so that your belly moves out against your hand. The hand on your chest should only move a little.
5. Breathe out slowly through your nose or mouth.
6. Repeat.

When you first learn belly breathing it might be easier for you to practice it lying down. As you get better at it, you can try belly breathing while sitting in a chair or other position of your choice.



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What stood out to me in this section?

Questions I still have on this topic

Resources

Video



[Diaphragmatic Breathing Technique](#)

Learn to belly breathe. This animated 3 minute video guides you through the steps to belly breathing.

Websites

[Relaxation, Yogic Breathing and The Vagus Nerve: Its All About the Exhalation](#) – Yoga U

Read how deep breathing helps reduce stress. Learn how exhaling from a deep breath can trigger the vagus nerve to slow your heart rate, and help you feel relaxed.



[Yogic Deep Breathing: How the Diaphragm Works](#) - Yoga U

Read how your diaphragm works. Includes a video guiding your through several minutes of deep breathing. The video shows how the diaphragm moves as you breathe.

Apps

iBreathe

Practice basic deep breathing exercises. Includes an option for push reminders.

Breathe+

Practice basic deep breathing exercises. Set up a schedule to do breathing exercises, with visual or vibration reminders.