

Your Guide to Optimal Breathing

‘Good breathing’ means moving air in and out of the chest with the minimum of effort and the right muscles. This gives you the correct amount of oxygen and carbon dioxide you need to live and feel well.

- The most important muscle used for your breathing is the **DIAPHRAGM**.
- The diaphragm is a strong flat, muscle which is attached to the lower edges of the ribs and spine
- It separates the chest from the gut.
- It is shaped like the dome of an umbrella when relaxed.
- As you breathe **IN** it contracts and moves downwards drawing air into your lungs. This causes your tummy to expand and rise.
- As you breathe **OUT** the diaphragm moves upwards, expelling the air from your lungs.
- ‘Optimal breathing’ also involves your lower ribs, which flare out gently, helping the diaphragm while the upper ribs remain relaxed.
- During increased activity the upper chest opens to draw in extra air that it needs. This can also happen when you are stressed.

Should I breathe through my nose or my mouth?

It is very important that you breathe in and out through your **nose** to allow the air to be filtered, warmed and moistened. It is okay and normal to breathe in and out through your mouth when you are exercising.

How slowly should I breathe?

At rest you should only be taking between **8-12** breaths in a minute. When you are practising have a count of how many breathes you take in one minute.

How do I practise a ‘Optimal Breathing’ technique?

- 1 Lie comfortably on your back with a pillow under your head and knees. Place one hand on your stomach, with the other hand relaxed by your side.
- 2 Gently close your mouth, lips together and keep your jaw loose.
- 3 Breathe in gently through your nose, feeling your tummy rise and expand ‘like a balloon’ as you breathe in. The breath should be unforced and silent.
- 4 Breathe out lightly through your nose if possible, without pushing, keeping your stomach relaxed.
- 5 Make sure you relax and pause at the end of each breath out.
- 6 When you breathe in, your upper chest should be relaxed and not moving. From time to time place your hand on your upper chest to check this.
- 7 As you repeat this sequence be aware of any areas of tension in your body and concentrate on ‘letting go’, particularly jaw, neck, shoulders and hands.

A Quick Summary

You need to practise as often as you can. Try little and often, e.g. three minutes every hour. Progress to practising whilst sitting, then standing and finally walking. As your body adapts to this way of breathing, you will find it requires less time and energy and is more relaxing. Remember, the more time put into practising, the sooner you will feel back in control.

If you are struggling with this, a Chartered Physiotherapist may be able to help – more details on our website at www.physiotherapyforbpd.org.uk