

Breathe yourself

✓ Slimmer
✓ Healthier
✓ Happier

Tiny tweaks to this most natural of functions can boost the way you feel

While most of us never give breathing a second thought, there are right and wrong ways of doing it.

Normal breathing should be quite effortless, through your nose and from your diaphragm. But when done incorrectly, it can lead to stress, illness and that familiar feeling of exhaustion at the end of the day.

“A healthy breathing technique not only provides your body with oxygen, but also helps clear the mind and energises your body,” trained breathwork and reiki practitioner Christine Heart Savage says.

“The key is to become aware of your breathing and to use techniques that can help you slow down your rate and rhythm. Not only will you feel calmer and less stressed, you’ll also start to notice physical and mental benefits,

such as increased energy, improved clarity and a happier life in general.”

➔ For calmness

When stress strikes, your first instinct is to panic. As a result, you breathe quicker and your heart races as part of the fight-or-flight response. While this kind of reaction is normal, it triggers sudden physical changes that can prolong those feelings of anxiety, such as shallow over-breathing, shortness of breath, dizziness and muscle tension.

Specific deep-breathing exercises, sometimes referred to as diaphragmatic breathing, are known for their ability to create a feeling of calm.

“Breathing this way, using your diaphragm, reduces stress hormone levels and improves



Christine Heart Savage
Breathing therapist

your body’s oxygenation, which calms your mind,” Christine says.

HOW TO DO IT: The key to this style of breathing is to take slow, deep and regular breaths. “It’s a great technique that you can use whenever you’re feeling anxious. However, it can feel a bit awkward when you’re first learning to breathe properly,” Christine explains.

Find somewhere comfortable to sit, but avoid lying down as you may fall asleep. Then take slow, deep breaths through your nose to a count of four, allowing your belly to fill with air. Hold for a count of two. Then exhale slowly through your mouth to a count of four.

➔ For energy

If you’re feeling tired or sluggish, you’re probably not getting enough oxygen in your bloodstream. That’s when deep breathing can help, because breathing correctly raises your energy levels. However, an incorrect breathing technique can end up depriving your body of oxygen, which leads to fatigue and lethargy. For an immediate surge of uplifting energy, try an energising breathing technique, such as the Bhastrika method.

“When you start breathing this way, your energy is used much more efficiently, which supports your body better,” Christine says.

HOW TO DO IT: Deep breathing is one of the best tools to boost your energy levels. “Even taking one deep breath

is going to start moving oxygen into your bloodstream,” Christine says.

To begin, sit in a comfortable position with your spine straight. Then inhale and exhale deeply through your nose in rapid succession at a rate of one second per cycle for 10 breaths. Then breathe normally for a few minutes. Do this three times.

Although Bhastrika is a safe practice, it’s not for everyone. If you’re prone to anxiety or dizziness, talk to your GP first. If you feel at all light-headed during the process, stop, remain seated and breathe normally.

➔ For weight loss

Struggling to lose stubborn belly fat? Advanced breathing exercises, such as Kapalbhathi, have been shown to boost metabolism, reduce food cravings and clear toxins from your body, which may in turn aid weight loss.

“We actually release about 70 per cent of toxins through our breath,” Christine says. Deep breathing also strengthens your abdominal muscles,

which may help burn fat and tone your waistline.

HOW TO DO IT: Christine says there are several ways you can breathe to lose weight. “It could be as simple as going for a walk and focusing on your breathing, or it could be doing some form of exercise,” she says.

Alternatively, to practise

Kapalbhathi breathing, sit comfortably on the floor and keep your spine straight. Then take

a deep breath through your nose until your lungs fill with air.

Next, breathe out forcefully until your stomach muscles move back towards your spine. Repeat this process for about five minutes.

➔ For clarity

When brain fog sets in, even the simplest task can be exhausting. First you lose your train of thought, frustration takes hold and you feel stressed, probably causing shallow over-breathing. This can lead to a shortage of oxygen in the brain, and that’s when mental clarity dwindles.

“Breathing more deeply helps to balance oxygen and carbon dioxide levels, which can make your thoughts clearer,” Christine says.

HOW TO DO IT: Take time to reset your breath. “To avoid shallow over-breathing, do a 20-minute breathing exercise. This will enlighten your brain and make thoughts more coherent,” Christine says.

To do this, lie on the floor with your knees bent, arms resting by your sides, with your palms turned upwards. Then breathe in through your nose for a count of five until you see your belly rise. Hold for five counts. Breathe out through your mouth for another count of five. Repeat this cycle.

“By the end of the exercise your mind should hopefully feel a good deal clearer,” Christine says.

Get appy!

There are plenty of free apps with advice on breathing, such as Breathe2Relax (iOs and Android). The good thing about these apps is they remind you to take moments in your day to do short breathing exercises. Sessions can last from one to five minutes and, on completion, you’ll receive a detailed summary of your progress.

How we do it, blow by blow

Proper breathing is essential for good health and wellbeing. “When you can’t breathe, nothing else matters,” says Heather Allan, CEO at the Lung Foundation of Australia. On average, you breathe more than 22,000 times a day, which equates to about 8000L of air.

This process uses two main muscle groups: the rib-cage muscles and the diaphragm – the sheet-like muscle that lies underneath your lungs. These muscles work together in normal breathing and help your rib cage expand as your lungs fill with air. Oxygen is then delivered from your lungs to the rest of your body through the bloodstream, and carbon dioxide is released back into the air when you breathe out.

Heather says you need to consider how you breathe because every part of your body needs oxygen to survive. “In most cases, it’s only when breathing is compromised that people start to think about it,” she says.

