

Just breathe

It seems so simple, but you may be doing it all wrong. Cheryl Parsons rounds up the best practices to improve body and mind

Inhale, exhale, repeat. It is not that difficult, is it? But according to experts, the key to all-around wellbeing begins with the breath. While it is something we do every day without even thinking about, there is so much more power and complexity to the art of breathing than we really give it credit for. From weight loss, constipation, anxiety and athletic recovery, to insomnia, depression and post-traumatic stress, controlled breathing, when done properly, can help alleviate a multitude of physical and psychological complaints.

These pranayama (breathing) practices will set you on the path towards a happier, healthier, more stress-free life. For each breathing practice, make sure you sit comfortably — either cross-legged or on a chair — with your spine upright and your shoulders relaxed. Discontinue if you feel dizzy or have shortness of breath. Consult your doctor first if you have any illnesses or heart-related ailments — high or low blood pressure, history of stroke etc.



1. BREATH OF FIRE (KAPALBHATI)

Kapal: skull, **Bhati:** to shine
 ● Relax your stomach muscles and place one hand on your lower belly. Resting your other hand under your nose will help you better understand the more forceful feel that your exhale will make.
 ● Expel the air forcefully through your nose, allowing your abdominal muscles to contract back towards your spine.
 ● Allow your inhalation to happen passively — like a recoil action drawing air back into the lungs.
 ● Exhale again forcefully, continuing at a steady pace for 10 rounds to begin with.
Benefits: Energises the body, aids detoxification, clears the mind.
Caution: Do not practise while pregnant or menstruating, or if you have high blood pressure. Wait at least two hours after eating.

2. ALTERNATE NOSTRIL BREATHING (NADI SHODHANA)

Nadi: subtle energy channel, **Shodhana:** purification
 ● Close the right nostril with your thumb and inhale through the left.
 ● Close the left nostril with your ring and little finger and exhale through the right.
 ● Inhale through the right, then close the right with your thumb.
 ● Exhale through the left to complete one round.
Benefits: Calms and centres the mind, reduces stress.



3. BUMBLE BEE (BHRAHMA)

Bhramari, type of Indian bee

- Close your ears with your thumb and use your middle and index fingers over your eyes and your ring and little fingers on your mouth. This *mudra* (hand position) symbolises a withdrawal of the senses.
- Exhale through your nose for a count of 10, while producing a humming, bee-like sound.
- Repeat for a few cycles, gradually building up to at least 10 rounds.

Benefits: Reduces anxiety, frustration, anger, restlessness and insomnia.

4. BELLOWS BREATH (BHASTRIKA)

- Take a few full, deep breaths from your belly.
- Exhale forcefully through your nose, then inhale forcefully through your nose. When you inhale, raise your hands up and open your palms. As you exhale, draw your hands back down into fists in front of your shoulders.
- Continue this "pumping" breath at the rate of one second per cycle. Start with 10 rounds, pause for 30 seconds, then rounds of 20 and 30 breaths.

Benefits: Energises the body, clears the mind, boosts metabolism.

Caution: Do not practise after eating or if you are pregnant, hypertensive or have epilepsy.

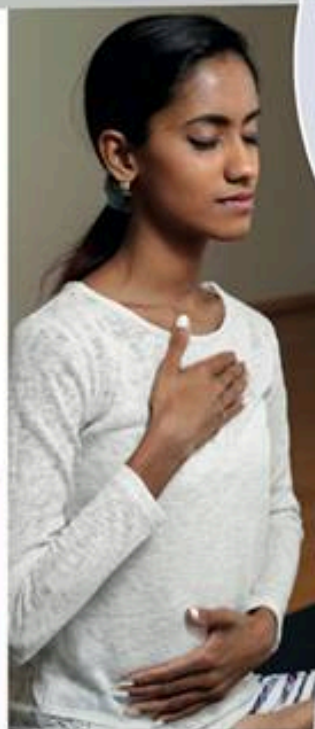


5. EQUAL PART BREATHING (SAMA VRIITTI)

Same, same, Vritti! Fluctuations

- Sit comfortably cross-legged or upright on a chair, relax your shoulders.
- Take a couple of deep breaths to determine a comfortable count for your breath.
- Begin to inhale for a set duration eg. for a count of four, then exhale for the same count, gradually increasing the duration as your breathing capacity improves.

Benefits: Calms the mind, improves focus, aids athletic ability.



6. DR ANDREW WEIL'S 4-7-8 METHOD

"If I had to limit my advice on healthier living to just one tip, it would be simply to learn how to breathe correctly," says Dr. Weil, a world-renowned doctor, teacher and holistic health author.

- Sit comfortably or lie down flat.
- Place one hand on your heart and the other on your lower belly. Place the tip of your tongue against the back of your front teeth.
- Breathe in silently through your nose for a count of four. Hold for a count of seven.
- Exhale through your mouth for a count of eight, making an audible "whoosh" sound to complete one full breath cycle.
- Repeat the cycle three more times, for a total of four breaths.

Benefits: Stress reduction, claims to induce sleep within 60 seconds.

Change your breath, change your life ...

"I left feeling like I was walking on air." "Breathing classes saved my life." "Groundbreaking." These are just some of the rave reviews of the classes led by a woman who some call the modern-day guru of breathing, Belisa Vranich, a renowned clinical psychologist, public speaker and author, is on a mission to change the way we breathe. Her latest book, *Breathe: 14 days to Oxygenating, Recharging, and Fueling your Body and Brain* has already received widespread critical acclaim.

"So many people are breathing in completely the wrong way," says Belisa. "They are using their neck and shoulder muscles to pick up their thoracic cavity -- breathing in a way I call 'vertically' rather than horizontally, which means to use the diaphragm to expand where the lungs are the biggest or the most dense." According to Vranich, simply changing the way we breathe has the power to control our moods and even impact our spinal health. "The way we breathe tells the vagus nerve whether to be in fight and flight, or rest and digest, and oxygenates us at a cellular level. It also has a profound effect on digestion and the health of our back because of the way the diaphragm is used during correct breathing to massage internal organs and create intrathoracic pressure, which is necessary for spinal health."

As the founder of The Breathing Classes, Vranich has worked with everyone from soldiers in combat and pregnant women, to athletes and high-powered businesspeople, teaching the importance of changing dysfunctional breathing patterns. The results, she says, are instantaneous. "They sleep. They stop being anxious. Their blood pressure goes down. They feel a sense of wholeness. They can meditate. Their endurance skyrockets. Their acidity normalises. Any pain disorder is reduced. Their senses are sharpened. Immediately. Really, immediately."

