

Breathing

Breathing is one of the most natural and most important things we do. Let's face it if we stop doing it, then there's only one outcome, but considering that it is so important to our survival, it can be something that gets taken for granted

Did you know that the way we breathe has a massive effect on our overall wellbeing?

Abdomen Vs Upper chest

In the red corner we have abdomen breathing, a heavy weight muscle that has a natural endurance that just gets the job done. Put into a poor position (compromised posture) however and this can easily become overwhelmed and restricted.

And in the blue corner we have upper chest breathing, normally used in times of need when you just need that extra bit of air. This guy can help us out of sticky situations when we need that extra push, although dominates proceedings if used too much!

Joking aside, put simply both abdomen and upper chest breathing are natural movements, one however can be overused far more than is necessary, especially if you experience stressful situations on a daily basis.

In a normal day to day scenario our abdomen or more specifically our diaphragm and intercostal muscles should be the chief movers and groovers when we breathe (with a little bit of help from their friends). We tend to rely more on breathing from the upper chest when we increase our physical exertion such as going for a run or riding a bike etc. In this situation muscles that attach higher up the ribcage will help increase space for the lungs to move just that little bit more.

The trouble starts to happen when we rely on the latter muscles on a more frequent basis. So apart from physical exercise, what can affect our breathing habits, I hear you cry?

- Stressful situations such as roadrage; deadlines at work; verbal and physical confrontations – all of these situations will elicit a natural reaction known as the fight or flight response - a mechanism that we used (and still do) to ensure our survival from life or death situations. If this response is experienced too often and for the wrong reasons, then it can have a detrimental effect on our overall well being.
- How we sit and move – if we slouch in our chair when we sit, then the abdomen and its contents will be condensed. This means that the diaphragm has a hard time of moving, and if that can't expand, then the chest has to! This can also relate to our posture and how we stand and move. All of these can singularly and collectively have an adverse affect on how we breathe.
- Our mental and emotional state – when you feel down it may be that you look down and you sigh more frequently. This can subconsciously affect our breathing rhythm and the

muscles that we recruit. Practice it now. Take a deep breath in as if you are sighing. Most likely your chest would have noticeably risen first.

So, do you favour breathing from the abdomen or chest?

Well a simple test is to place one hand on your heart and the other over your belly button. Close your eyes and feel the way you breathe. Does the hand that is above the heart move first (boo!) or is it your hand that is placed over your abdomen (yay!)?

This simple test isn't fool proof, but it can give an insight into how your body may be moving subconsciously.

It is estimated that an average adult human will take anywhere between 12-20 breaths per minute. This adds up to 17,000-30,000 breaths per day.

That's a hell of a lot, especially if we rely on smaller muscles to do the job!

Reconnect with the breath!

This is a nice easy exercise that helps promote a reconnection to diaphragmatic breathing. Firstly ensure that you are in an upright posture with your back in a neutral position

- Take a breath out allowing your belly button to move towards your spine, pushing any remaining air out of your lungs
- Place your hands on your belly with your middle fingers placed together (the tips of your fingers should touch) over your belly button.
- Now take a breath in, breathing from your abdomen. Your belly button should move away from your spine and your middle fingers should now move away from each other
- As you breathe out you now return to the start position, with the tips of your middle fingers coming together.

During this exercise you are not restricting breathing from the chest, this should naturally come after the movement from the abdomen. Like waves moving in the ocean, one wave leads to another.

NB if you've never practised this type of exercise before it is best to practice for a short duration at a time, so that your body can adjust to the increased amount of oxygen. if you feel light headed at any point then just stop.

So what else can you do to go with your breathing exercises?

- Stretching – compromised positions can lead to short muscles and these will need to be lengthened in one form or another, so that they can return to their natural position
- Connect with the core – you may always hear people going on about exercising the core, but training your core to activate properly will have a knock on effect to the way you breathe by the positive ways it changes your posture
- Active rest – are you sat down for continuously long periods of time throughout the day? Well if the answer is yes, then taking regular breaks now and again will not only get you moving, it will encourage your spine etc to be in a better position and thus influencing the way in which you breathe

Jimmy Dean put it well when he said 'I can't change the direction of the wind, but I can adjust my sails to always reach my destination.'

It may not seem it, but 'small' changes to the way you breathe can have a massive impact on your overall wellbeing! Have a go and note the positive effects it has on you and if in doubt.... just keep breathing, just keep breathing.