

The Omnipotent Power of Breath, Part 1

By Patricia A. Muehsam, M.D. Last Updated: November 28, 2010 Created: February 26, 2010

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Babies breathe abdominally, which has been associated with better health than chest breathing. (Louise McCoy/The Epoch Times)

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In this four-part series, I will discuss the omnipotent power of breath: what ancient wisdom teaches us, and what modern science has confirmed.

Breathing is the most overlooked, easiest, and accessible tool we have to enhance our state of body-mind health. There is a direct link between breathing and health. Improper breathing can cause or aggravate all diseases and health issues. Learning to breathe correctly can have immediate and profound effects on mental, emotional, and physical states of imbalance or disease and allow our body-mind to be in an optimal state for healing.

The concept of breath as being tantamount to life is an essential tenet of global healing traditions worldwide. "Qi" and "prana" are considered life force in traditional Chinese medicine and Ayurveda, respectively.

In Part 1, I will describe correct breathing, the difference between abdominal and chest breathing, and the science of breathing.

Our first experiences with breathing were the most natural: Correct breathing is innate breathing. As infants, our breathing is natural, spontaneous, and unlabored. Infants breathe naturally with the belly. If you

observe a baby breathing, you'll notice his or her belly enlarges on an inhalation.

As children, when we become self-aware and self-conscious, we may lose touch with this natural and spontaneous way of breathing. Many of us, having forgotten how to belly breathe as we did when we were infants, become habitual chest breathers, holding the belly in and breathing from our chests.

Society and culture also influence how we breathe. Men and women receive subtle cues about the necessity of a flat stomach, of standing tall, and leading with the chest, thus inhibiting our natural, innate form of abdominal breathing.

Emotional states also affect our breathing. Fear, anxiety, anger, and other stressful feelings can unconsciously activate chest breathing, inhibit abdominal breathing, and even cause us to hold our breath or stop breathing momentarily.

Abdominal breathing is simply letting the belly expand when we inhale, as opposed to inhaling with the chest. The chest may rise a little, but most of the breath comes from letting the belly out. By letting the belly expand when we inhale, we make room for the lungs to expand more fully. The intestines move out of the way, making room for the lungs.

Abdominal breathing is sometimes referred to as diaphragmatic breathing. We are not actually breathing with the diaphragm. The diaphragm is akin to a swinging door that moves downward to allow for more lung expansion when we let the belly out while inhaling.

In Parts 2–4, I will explain the link between breath and emotions, the science of breathing, how chest breathing can cause and aggravate illness, the benefits of abdominal breathing, and offer suggestions for practicing abdominal breathing.

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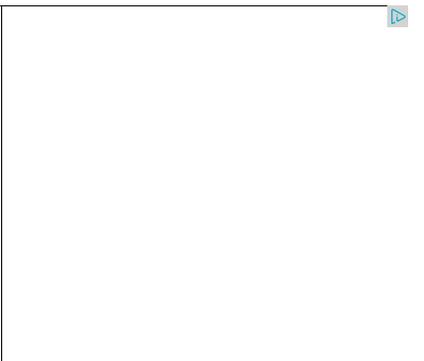
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The science of breathing

By Patricia A. Muehsam, M.D. Last Updated: November 28, 2010 Created: March 4, 2010

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In Part 1, I discussed correct or natural breathing and the difference between abdominal and chest breathing. In Part 2, I will explain the science of breathing.

Western medicine, in its infinitely advanced technological wizardry, sometimes loses touch with simple concepts and techniques that can have profound effects on our health. Breathing is one such example. Yet we have Western physiology to thank, for it allows me to detail the hows and whys of this powerful process below.

First, a little digression for a review of respiratory physiology and the nervous system.

The autonomic nervous system. In the Western medical worldview, the autonomic nervous system is the control center for bodily functions. This nervous system consists of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. These two work in opposition to one another, like a toggle switch. When the sympathetic nervous system is on, the parasympathetic system is off, and vice versa.

What the sympathetic system does. This is the “fight or flight” nervous system. It is a fabulous system and serves us well when we need to be physically active, run around the block, be vigilant in our thinking, or be mentally or physically focused.

For example, it sends blood and nerve impulses to our muscles when we need to run. It increases heart rate, blood pressure, and respiratory rate—all necessary increases to help us run around that block. It inhibits digestion, relaxation, and sleep and can inhibit sexual function.

What the parasympathetic system does. The parasympathetic system allows for the activation of our “vegetative functions”: digestion, sleep, relaxation, and certain aspects of sexual function. When it is on, blood pressure, heart rate, and respiratory rate are reduced. The body’s natural restorative and self-healing mechanisms are engaged when the parasympathetic system is engaged.

Abdominal breathing and chest breathing have immediate effects on our health. How we initiate our breath has immediate effects on our health. If we start breathing with the chest, not with the abdomen, the sympathetic nervous system is engaged.

If we initiate our breath with the abdomen, abdominal breathing as I described in Part 1, the parasympathetic nervous system is engaged. These nervous system effects are instantaneous, given the nature of the physiologic mechanisms involved.

In Parts 3 and 4, I will revisit the link between breath and emotions, explain how chest breathing can cause and aggravate illness, the benefits of abdominal breathing, and offer suggestions for practicing abdominal breathing.

Part 1: theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/30474/

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In Parts 1 and 2, I discussed correct or natural breathing, the difference between abdominal and chest breathing, and the science of breathing.

In Part 3, I will revisit the link between breath and emotions and describe the powerful and immediate effects of breathing: how chest breathing can cause and aggravate illness, and how abdominal breathing can improve health.

Breath and emotions. I often refer to the body-mind, describing the intimate connection between thoughts, feelings, and

body. (See my prior article series "Emotions and Health" for more details, theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/29130.) The psyche and soma are completely linked. There is no distinction between the two.

Stressful emotional states, often causing us to chest breathe at the expense of abdominal breathing, will toggle on the sympathetic nervous system, thus causing or aggravating any health issues we may have. Chest breathing will increase emotional states of fear, anxiety, and anger. And these emotional states, in turn, can cause us to chest breathe, with the consequent ill effects on health. Abdominal breathing can alleviate these health issues.

A little more about chest breathing. To breathe fully, chest breathing is always involved. One's chest will rise and expand as one's lungs fill more fully. This is especially useful if we are doing strenuous physical activity and happens naturally and spontaneously. It is important to be aware that one initiates the breath via one's abdomen, not the chest.

How chest breathing can cause or aggravate illness. Chest breathing alone can cause and aggravate illness. Because chest breathing engages the sympathetic nervous system, it can inhibit digestive function, cause or aggravate cardiovascular problems, and make sleep, rest, relaxation, and even sex problematic.

In fact, all health issues are exacerbated by chest breathing: for example, circulatory diseases such as high blood pressure and coronary artery disease, respiratory disorders such as asthma, gastrointestinal issues such as gastritis and ulcers, and life-challenging diagnoses such as cancer and other chronic conditions that Western medicine deems incurable.

Digestion is also impaired by chest breathing. Peristalsis is directly inhibited by chest breathing. Since food is our first medicine, we can appreciate the profound and systemic effects of it on our body-mind health.

Learning to breathe naturally can alleviate health problems. By learning or actually relearning how to breathe naturally, through intentional abdominal breathing we can learn to consciously control which nervous system is activated.

Abdominal breathing will toggle on the parasympathetic system. We can improve our sleep, digestion, and concentration; enhance relaxation; relieve uncomfortable emotional states; improve cardiovascular function—any health issues that we may have. This parasympathetic state enables the optimal and necessary conditions for healing disease because a state of complete rest and relaxation is necessary for recovery from any illness.

In Part 4, I will explain how to breathe from the abdomen and offer suggestions for practicing.

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The Omnipotent Power of Breath, Part 1: theepochtimes.com/n2/content/view/30474

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In Parts 1 through 3, I discussed correct or natural breathing, the difference between abdominal and chest breathing, the science of breath, and effects that breathing can have on body-mind health, including the link between breath and emotions.

In Part 4, I will explain the how-tos of abdominal breathing and offer practical suggestions for incorporating this simple and powerful technique into your daily life.

Abdominal Breathing

You can practice abdominal breathing anytime, anywhere, in any position—sitting, standing, or lying down. Easiest may be in bed, upon waking, or just before going to sleep. This can even help with sleep. Practice at other times during the day, while sitting, standing, walking.

Start by placing one hand on your chest and the other on you abdomen, below your belly button. First, gently observe your breath. Breathing through your nose, start to gently allow the belly to rise on the inhalation and to fall on the exhalation. Ideally, the belly will rise and fall, but chest movement will be minimal. Breathe slowly and gently. Notice any tension in the process, on the inhalation or on the exhalation. Letting the exhalation be a little longer than the inhalation can help in relieving tension.

The guidance of an experienced teacher can also be helpful. The healing systems of Chinese medicine and Ayurveda offer many practical tools for learning how to breathe as nature intends us: for example, qigong, tai chi, and yoga. These systems also offer more advanced and specialized breathing techniques that can further improve and enhance our health. Details are beyond the scope of this article and are best learned from a teacher.

Practical suggestions

Don't worry that you are not breathing correctly. There is no right or wrong. Simply be aware that different methods and techniques have different effects on our body-mind. And notice how you are breathing. Notice how your breath may change with different states of emotions. Just start by being aware. If you find yourself feeling anxious, worried, fearful, or experiencing any other uncomfortable emotion, experiment with abdominal breathing.

Notice how you are breathing during various daily activities, and experiment with intentional belly breathing if you notice you are starting your breath with your chest. Take advantage of downtime: While waiting for a computer to turn on, while in the line at a store, while driving, on a bus or a subway, observe and experiment with your breathing. Belly breathing can make being stuck in traffic actually feel pleasant if you're someone who feels challenged in traffic jams.

Consider taking time during your day, even if just for a minute or two, to notice and practice belly breathing. Over time, with practice, you'll find yourself breathing this way more spontaneously.

My final suggestion is to be gentle with yourself. Be easy. Do not judge yourself. Such thoughts will impact your breath, your physiology, and your physical, mental, and emotional well-being. And, you may be likely to hold your breath!

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