



## Breathe Like a Baby You Might Live Longer

It's easy to take breathing for granted. It's so simple babies can do it, and they do it very well. Babies breathe the right way, taking deep, full breaths from the abdomen. The obvious ease of their breathing may be what compels us to watch them as they sleep, the gentle rise and fall of their tummies lulling us into a more peaceful state of being.

Most adults are pretty lousy breathers, breathing from the chest, not the belly. We tend to take in tiny sips of air, leading to a poor exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide. Our breathing is unbalanced: We exhale more than we inhale, the classic description of hyperventilation. Because of this, our bodies are always on alert, ever ready to trigger the fight-or-flight response. That's great if we actually need to fight or flee, but not so great when everyday mishaps — a spilled cup of coffee, traffic delays — set off this involuntary physical response.

This nearly constant flood of stress hormones can trigger an array of health problems, including high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, insomnia, and a suppressed immune system. And because this stress response is involuntary, there isn't much we can do about it. Except breathe.

**Breathing is trending.** Don't laugh. Google the term "4-7-8 breathing method" and you'll find more than 10,000 results. In a January 2015 interview with *Men's Journal*, Dr. Andrew Weil, sometimes called the father of integrative medicine, said the best advice he'd ever received was to learn to breathe properly. There's even an app for that; Spire, a wearable breathing tracker, measures your breathing in real time, showing results on your smartphone. Depending on your physical state, Spire might suggest you take a minute to breathe deeply, participate in a breathing activity, or simply relax.

### **Controlling the breath isn't new.**

It's part of many ancient Eastern practices, including yoga and tai chi. But it didn't take off in the West until the mid-1970s when Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard Medical School cardiologist, published *The Relaxation Response* (William Morrow). Benson argued that controlled breathing — inhaling through the nose for a count of five, holding the breath for a moment, then exhaling completely through the mouth for a count longer than five — triggered the parasympathetic nervous system and countered the fight-or-flight response. Continuing research backs him up, suggesting that controlled breathing manages stress and anxiety, lowers blood pressure, and possibly even changes the gene expression involved in immune function, energy metabolism, and insulin secretion.

**Controlled breathing isn't complicated.** Though you can make it so. The simplest way to practice is to lie on your back, knees bent. Place your hands on your abdomen and take a deep belly breath, inhaling through your nose. Feel your abdomen expand. Exhale slowly through your mouth, contracting your abdominal muscles, taking longer to exhale than you did to inhale. That's it. You can make it more complicated (Google the 4-7-8 method for a lot of detail), but simple awareness is the first step to better breathing. As you become more aware, you may find you are taking more full, relaxed belly breaths throughout your day, with all of the concurrent health benefits for mind, body, and spirit. ✨

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