

# **Breathe Right! – Part I**

## **Do You Need Breathing Retraining?**

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*Note: This is not intended as medical advice, but the explanation of techniques for improved breathing control with COPD. Always check with your doctor before starting any new techniques or exercises. It is best to learn these techniques under the guidance of a Respiratory Therapist or Physical Therapist in a pulmonary rehabilitation or other clinical setting.*

- **Signs of Incorrect Breathing**
- **Negative Effects of Incorrect Breathing**
- **Functional (non-structural) causes of Incorrect Breathing**
- **Potential Benefits of Breathing Retraining**

Usually, we breathe in the automatic mode and are not conscious of our breathing. We become conscious of it only when we experience a breathing problem such as shortness of breath, chest tightness or a feeling of suffocation. Eastern societies in the ancient times emphasized conscious breathing for physical, mental and spiritual benefits. The importance of deeper, fuller and relaxed breathing for health and wellness cannot be overstated. Everyone healthy or otherwise should learn and make sure they breathe correctly. They should receive breathing retraining if they identify any signs of incorrect breathing in themselves.

### **Signs of Incorrect Breathing**

- Your breathing is incorrect/ irregular when you are not exerting

and still experience any of the following signs:

- Neck and shoulders moving while breathing
- Shallow breathing which shows excessive involvement of the upper chest and/or neck muscles
- Jerky breathing often resulting in sobbing or sighing
- Rapid breathing such as more than twenty (20) breaths a minute
- Uneven breathing such as rapid breathing alternating with long or jerky pause
- Mouth breathing even when the nostrils are not blocked
- You take too long a pause from one breath to the next, like you don't want to take the next breath
- Loud and noisy breathing without a medical reason

### **Negative Effects of Incorrect Breathing**

- Chronic irregular breathing may cause one or more of the following:
- Breathlessness and/or difficulty breathing
- Tingling sensation
- Chest pains
- Frequent yawning
- Feelings of dizziness or faintness
- Poor oxygen supply to the brain and/or body
- Agitated mind and emotions

## **Functional (non-structural) Causes**

A faulty or incorrect breathing pattern such as habitual overbreathing, breath holding, or shallow breathing may be genetically acquired, learned, or affected by physical and/or psycho-emotional factors. There may be structural causes for insufficient or restricted breathing, which is not the focus of this presentation.

Please note this is not a complete list, but some of the functional causes:

- Habitual mouth breathing due to such problems as chronic sinus blockage or malocclusion of teeth
- Chronically tight chest or weak chest muscles
- Poor posture such as “forward head,” raised shoulders, tilted head or excessive kyphosis
- Weak or restricted diaphragm
- Restricted movement of the ribcage or poor musculature
- Habitually tense chest, shoulders or neck muscles
- Habitual “emotional breathing,” influenced by such chronic negative emotions as anxiety, depression and anger

## **Potential Benefits of Breathing Training**

- Increased sense of control over shortness of breath
- Increased sense of personal well-being
- Increased self-confidence
- Better quality of sleep

- Improved posture
- Increased exercise endurance
- Reduced anxiety and/or depression

### **Helpful Tips**

- Seek breathing training. Many (not all) teachers of eastern exercise systems such as Yoga, Tai Chi, Qui Gong provide breathing training. Find a teacher who has some experience of working with irregular breathing or identified as a “Breathing Coach.”
- Slow Your Breathing. If you breathe more than 20 breaths per minutes, you might be using your upper chest, neck and shoulder muscles during breathing. Use of accessory breathing muscles such as collar, neck and shoulder muscles can result in shallow and anxious breathing.
- Make the diaphragmatic muscle and ribcage flexible. Depending on the flexibility of the diaphragmatic muscle, the movement of the diaphragm varies from individual to individual. For example, in a person with extreme rigidity of the diaphragmatic muscle and the lower ribs, the movement may be only one (1) centimeter. But in a person with great flexibility of diaphragmatic muscle and the lower ribs, the movement of the diaphragmatic muscle may be as much as ten (10) centimeters.
- Perform upper and lower body exercises.
- Stretch and squeeze the whole body
- Move your spine in five (5) directions, that is, practice gentle forward bending, backward bending, side ways bending, spine

elongation and spinal twists and you will feel your lower ribs and diaphragmatic muscle moving as you breathe. If you are not familiar with yoga poses, consider taking a yoga class with a teacher who teaches gentle yoga.

In my experience even some of the yoga practitioners (even after several years of practice) breathe incorrectly. In my yoga classes whenever I specifically checked for breathing, on average, one out of ten students was incorrectly breathing. A large number of people with chronic illness, such as heart disease, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) or chronic pain, tend to breathe incorrectly. They had not given much thought to the process or mechanism of breathing. Their breathing was always automatic and subconscious. They never practiced conscious breathing so they could not correct it. Learn correct breathing and practice relaxed breathing. Avoid strained breathing.

Correct breathing and physical and mental relaxation, the two master skills, can make a big difference in your quality of life. Learn physical and mental relaxation along with correct breathing to enjoy better quality of life, health and wellness.

You may review more techniques for physical and mental relaxation on [www.mindpub.com](http://www.mindpub.com). And more of Dr. Sharma's articles on breathing and Yoga for COPD at [www.breathingbetterlivingwell.com/articles.php](http://www.breathingbetterlivingwell.com/articles.php).