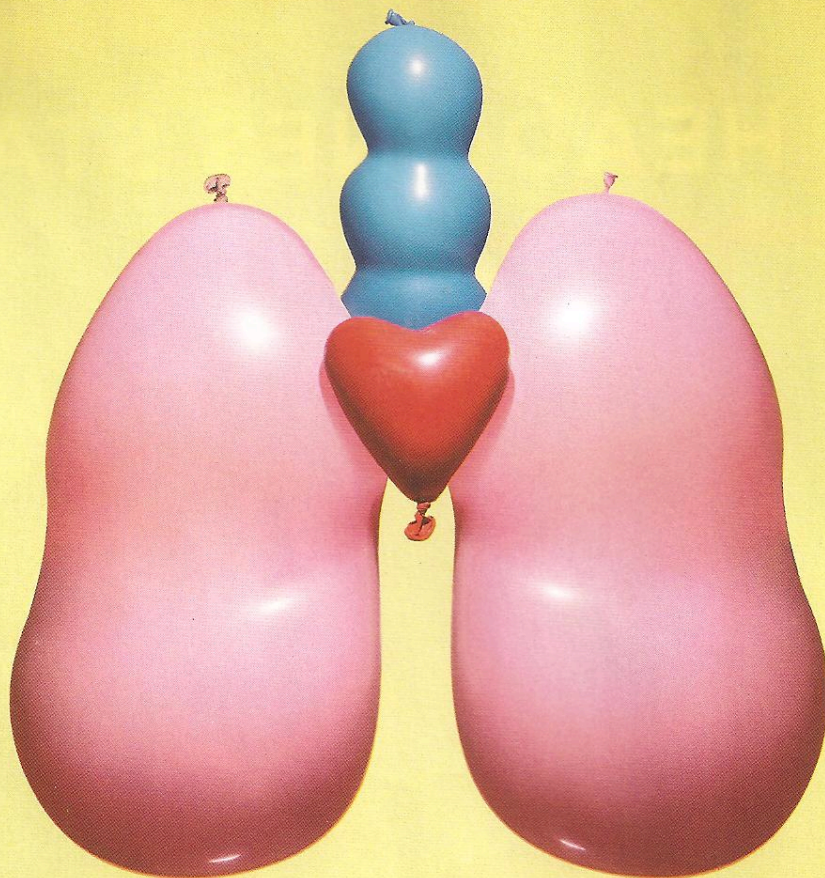


The Breathing Cure

It's long been considered one of the greatest tools for relaxation, but how you inhale and exhale matters even more than you might think.



THE AVERAGE PERSON breathes in and out up to 23,040 times per day, but most of us do so inefficiently, taking short, shallow chest breaths while subconsciously contracting our abs, says Jane Pernotto Ehrman, a behavioral health specialist at the Cleveland Clinic Center for Lifestyle Medicine. Even though we're all born breathing from our bellies, by the time we hit adolescence, stress has crept in, and a natural response to stress—tightening up—restricts our breathing. But you can teach yourself how to breathe easier and reap serious physiological benefits in the process.

FALL ASLEEP FASTER: 4-7-8 BREATHING

To prepare for a restful night, Andrew Weil, MD, director of the Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona, recommends this breathing technique, which acts like a natural tranquilizer. “Unlike sleep medications, which often lose effectiveness over time, 4-7-8 breathing is subtle at first but gains power with practice,” Weil says.

TRY IT: Place the tip of your tongue just behind your upper teeth and keep it there throughout the exercise. Exhale completely through your mouth, making a gentle whoosh sound. Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose for a count of four. Now hold your breath for seven counts and follow with an eight-count whoosh exhale through the mouth. Complete three more cycles, repeating every five minutes until you drift off.

EASE ALLERGIES AND ASTHMA: SHINING SKULL BREATHING

One small study found that yoga breathing exercises significantly improved lung function in patients with asthma when combined with medication. According to Larry Payne, PhD, founding director of the Yoga Therapy Rx certification program at Los Angeles' Loyola

Marymount University, this ancient rapid-fire breathing method is especially cleansing to the sinuses.

TRY IT: Begin with a deep inhale through the nose, and on the exhale, breathe out short, powerful bursts, about one per second for ten seconds. That's one set; start with three sets and build as you go. Payne warns that this can increase your heart rate, so if you have high blood pressure or another heart condition, consult your doctor first.

RELIEVE DISCOMFORT: PAIN IMAGERY BREATHING

“When we experience pain, we often hold our breath, which can contribute to inflammation through the release of the stress hormone cortisol,” says Pernotto Ehrman.

TRY IT: Close your eyes and imagine your body growing relaxed. As you breathe through your belly, visualize oxygen filling any areas of tension with comfort and calm. Then picture the pain leaving with each exhalation. “The longer you exhale, the more you stimulate the vagus nerve in the brain, telling it you're in a safe environment,” says Chicago psychologist Michael Merrill, PhD.

QUELL NAUSEA: GROUNDING BREATHING

This breathing style may ease nausea by encouraging peristalsis, the muscular contractions that move food down into the stomach. “Grounding breathing suppresses the gag reflex, and everything starts to flow in the right direction,” says Pernotto Ehrman, who uses it with chemotherapy patients and pregnant women.

TRY IT: Visualize walking barefoot down a long stone staircase. Inhale slowly through the nose for four counts while focusing on how cool the stones feel. Then exhale for eight to ten counts through pursed lips as you imagine taking a step down. Continue until the queasiness has passed. —LESLIE GOLDMAN