

HOW IS YOUR BREATHING?

By Scott Lohmann, Instructor, Adaptive P.E.

How is your breathing? You might think it's okay, but is your respiratory system functioning at an optimal level? One simple way to find out is to ask yourself what type of breather you are. Do you breathe with your diaphragm or are you a chest breather? If you're not breathing with your diaphragm, you are not getting enough air into your lungs. What that simply translates to is less oxygen uptake. Here is an exercise you can do to improve your breathing.

You can do this lying down or reclining, and it's especially good to work on before sleep. Lie down on your back with your legs straight, and get comfortable. Put one hand on your stomach, specifically the abdomen, above your naval. Take a deep breath through your nose. As you inhale look at your hand--it should rise. When your abdomen has fully expanded, slowly let the air out of your mouth. As you exhale your hand should fall flat. Repeat this process several times until you get the hang of it. Try this technique for at least 5 minutes; afterwards, rest and breathe normally. This is diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is the major muscle of breathing.

Once you feel comfortable with at least 5 minutes of this technique, several times a week for 2-3 weeks, it is time to "raise the bar!" We do this by replacing your hand with an object that weighs between 1 and 3 pounds, such as a hardcover book, a hand or leg weight, or a package of rice or beans. Start slowly and work up--don't overdo! Maintain your practice time of 5 minutes, and increase to 10 minutes as tolerated. Your diaphragm is now working harder and getting stronger. Now that you have progressed to a weighted object, you should feel the difference, and this translates to easier breathing for you!

The final stage is when you can perform this exercise while standing. This is important because you need to get as much oxygen as you can while you move and exercise. It's also important for abdominal control. People who have good control of their diaphragm also have good abdominal strength. Musicians who play wind instruments and singers know all about this--it's the first thing they learn before they become great performers. Practice your breathing and keep moving!!

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Margaret Stephens, RRT, RCP, is continuing to offer this program, which is designed to assist persons with a pulmonary diagnosis to increase their stamina and maintain physical fitness. For more information: (650) 368-7732