

WHOLE HEALTH: INFORMATION FOR VETERANS

Breathing and Health



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

Breathing and Health

Why is breathing important?

Breathing keeps us alive! Often, breathing becomes shallow and/or fast. For some people, this can happen all the time. For others, it can happen when they are stressed, in pain, panicked, or anxious. Many people may not even realize this is happening. When your breath becomes shallow and fast, your nervous system becomes more stressed (“fight or flight”) instead of relaxed (“rest and digest”). Since breathing is so important, it is best to take deep, slow breaths. Practicing breathing exercises can help you breathe in a more relaxed way more of the time. This is better for your health.

How can breathing help me?

There are many benefits to relaxed breathing. It can help your body and mind become calm. It can help you deal with stress. Practicing breathing before bed can help you fall asleep. Studies show that breathing exercises can help lower blood pressure.¹ Breathing exercises are often used along with other treatments.

Who shouldn't do breathing exercises?

If you have trouble breathing, are on oxygen, or become dizzy or lightheaded easily, you may need extra support to do breathing practices. If so, talk with your health care team before doing breathing exercises.

How can I practice breathing?

There are many ways to practice breathing. Below are just a few you can try. Take time to find the exercise that feels and works best for you. The more relaxed and comfortable you are during the breathing exercise, the less stressful and more effective it will be.

Breathing exercises can be done anywhere. When you are first starting, it can be helpful to find a quiet space where you won't be disturbed. This can help you become more comfortable to do the practice later anywhere you go such as in the car, at work, or in the shower. Many of these exercises can be done without anyone knowing you're doing them.

You can spend as much time as you would like doing a breathing exercise. To start, set aside 5-10 minutes. You can do it for a longer or shorter time depending on what works for you.

You can use breathing exercises as often as you would like. The more often they are practiced, the more effective they can be. They can be used in times of stress or anxiety and daily for relaxation.

Abdominal (Belly) Breathing

- Lay on your back if you can. If not, sit in a chair. Let your body relax into the ground or into the chair. Use whatever props you may want to be comfortable, such as a rolled up blanket under your knees or behind your back. Let your eyes close, or find a point to look at without straining. Place one hand over your bellybutton and one hand on your chest.
- Bring attention to your breath. Observe the breath without changing it. Notice how it enters and leaves your body. Do your hands move? Does one hand move more than the other? Take a few breaths like this.
- Slowly, bring more air into the lower part of your lungs. To do this, think about your belly as a balloon. When you inhale, use the air to inflate the balloon. When you exhale, think of deflating the balloon. This should make the hand on your bellybutton move up and down more than the one on your chest. Continue to take slow, deep breaths like this.

Counting

- Find a comfortable position. You can lie down, sit, or stand. Let your eyes close or find a point to look at without straining.
- Start by inhaling for 1 second and exhaling for 2 seconds. Repeat this until you feel comfortable at this pace.
- When you're comfortable, take more time inhaling and exhaling. For example, inhale for 2 seconds and exhale for 3 seconds. Then, once you're comfortable, inhale for 3 seconds and exhale for 4 seconds, and so on.
- Consider counting to yourself while you're doing this to help focus.
- You can also hold your breath between inhaling and exhaling. For example, inhale for 2 seconds, hold for 2 seconds, exhale for 3 seconds, and repeat.
- Breathe at a pace that feels comfortable and relaxed for you.

Imagery

- Find a comfortable position. You can sit or lie down. Let your eyes close or find a point to look at without straining. Try some of the different images below while breathing.
 - Waves: Think of your breath as gentle waves flowing in as you inhale and out of your body as you exhale. Repeat.
 - Body: Think of breathing in air from the bottom of your feet to the top of your head. Then, exhale from the top of your head out through your feet. Repeat.

Sayings

- Find a comfortable position. You can sit or lie down. Let your eyes close or find a point to look at without straining.
- When you breathe in, say to yourself, "I am." When you breathe out, say to yourself, "at peace," "calm," or another word or phrase that sounds good to you.

Are there other ways to practice breathing?

There are many ways to practice breathing. If you would prefer someone to talk you through a breathing exercise, there are many resources online. You may want to start with some on Dr. Andrew Weil's website: <https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/body-mind-spirit/stress-anxiety/breathing-three-exercises>.

Am I doing breathing exercises right?

When starting to do breathing exercises, it is very common for the mind to wander. You can start thinking about the past, the future, feelings, or images. When this happens, don't be hard on yourself or stop the practice. Be aware of what is going on, and return to the practice. To help focus, you can try some of the breathing exercises that use words or images.

If your breathing is becoming deeper and slower, and you're not getting dizzy or more anxious, you're likely doing what is right for you. It is important when doing breathing exercises to not become hard on yourself or try too hard. Start small.

For you to consider:

- How do you think relaxed breathing could help you?
- When do you think you would use breathing exercises? Will you do it every day or just as needed?
- Where do you think you could practice breathing exercises?

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

For more information:

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration –	A variety of Whole Health handouts on ways to use the power of your mind.	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp
Veterans Health Administration – Whole Health Website	List of mobile applications including ones for relaxed breathing.	https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-resources/MobileApps-OnlineTools.asp
Dr. Weil	Additional breathing exercises	https://www.drweil.com/health-wellness/body-mind-spirit/stress-anxiety/breathing-three-exercises/

This handout was written for the Veteran's Health Administration (VHA) by Mara Motley, MD, Academic Integrative Health Fellow, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on a tool for clinicians, Breathing by

Shilagh Mirgain, PhD and Janice Singles, PsyD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.

References

1. Schein MH, Gavish B, Herz M, et al. Treating hypertension with a device that slows and regularises breathing: a randomised, double-blind controlled study. *J Hum Hypertens.* 2001;15(4):271-278. doi: 10.1038/sj.jhh.1001148.

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