

Breath, Life, Health



By Dr. Connie

Every moment of every day of our lives, from our first inhalation, to our last exhalation, each one of us is subject in body and in consciousness to that invisible reality that is our breath. Breath is life, the essence of existence, prana. The word inspiration is derived from the Latin *inspirare*, meaning to breathe into or inspire.

Most of us pass our days without giving too much thought to our breath, though we are aware of changes in the depth and pace of our breath when we panic or sigh in relief or birth our babies or relax. Study of and practice of conscious breathing techniques allows us to radically alter our health and our experience of life. Ancient and modern day yogis have long relied on various pranayama techniques to tune in to and control aspects of consciousness.

Even many non-yogis are familiar with such techniques as *Nadi Shodhana*, or alternate nostril breathing. In this breathing technique, the right nostril is blocked with the thumb, while breath is exhaled and inhaled through the left nostril. The left nostril is then blocked with the ring finger, while breath is exhaled and inhaled through the right nostril. The benefits of this practice include regulation of body temperature, soothing of the nervous system (promoting calmness and better sleep), improved mental focus, revitalization.

Breathing through the left nostril is cooling and calm, and enhances right brain activity. Right nostril breathing is warming and energizing, and enhances left brain activity, such as verbal performance. Emphasizing either side emphasizes the qualities associated with breathing through that nostril. Alternate nostril breathing balances these qualities.

Almost all breath training emphasizes nose breathing, which promotes overall health. The nose, as it turns out, performs many vital functions in the body. It filters, warms and moisturizes air, helps regulate the volume of air, promotes nitric oxide, and encourages diaphragmatic breathing.

Diaphragmatic breathing deepens the breath, relaxes the body, relieves stress and anxiety, lowers blood pressure and heart rate, improves delivery of oxygen to the organs, slows the rate of breathing. Diaphragmatic breathing practices involve inhaling through the nose and exhaling through the nose or through the mouth, depending on the practice.

Inhaling, rather than exhaling, through the mouth can adversely affect the body. Those who breathe through their mouths at night tend towards snoring, unrefreshing sleep, morning sore throats, gum disease, higher risk of cavities and bad breath.

Daytime mouth breathing worsens the situation, with consequences such as headaches and worsening of asthma, digestive disturbances such as acid reflux and constipation, and other medical issues such as high blood pressure. In children, mouth breathing may result in changes in facial structure, affecting their appearance throughout life.

Many conditions result in part from dysfunctional breathing. If you find that you suffer from conditions that do not respond to well indicated treatments (such as gastric distress), or that are considered to be "essential" (such as essential hypertension), or if you are constantly fatigued, or yawning and sighing, or suffering from odd chest and shoulder pains, consider that your breathing may be part of the problem. Retrain your breath and you will retrain your brain and be healthier in all ways.