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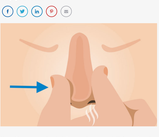
# How and Why To Try Alternate Nostril Breathing

This style of breathwork can invigorate you and help you focus



How often do you stop to think about your breath? Probably not very often, if you're like most people. In, out, in, out ... as long as your body is doing what it's supposed to do, you're likely not giving much thought to this particular bodily function.

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But maybe it's time to start. Techniques like alternate nostril breathing can help you relieve stress, improve concentration and even become a better breather overall.

Integrative medicine specialist Melissa Young, MD, explains why this yogic breathing technique is so good for you and walks you through exactly how to do it for the best benefits.

## What is alternate nostril breathing?

Known in Sanskrit as *Nadi Shodhana*, alternate nostril breathing is also sometimes called channel breath — and actually, those two names tell you a lot about what it can do.

*Nadi* refers to the energy that circulates throughout your body, while *Shodhana* refers to purifying or cleansing. *Nadi Shodhana*, then, is said to help clear your energy channels and bring about inner balance.

"You do it by isolating each nostril, breathing in through only one of them at a time and then exhaling through the other," Dr. Young says. Before sharing a step-by-step guide to doing it yourself, though, she explains some of the health benefits.

## Benefits of alternate nostril breathing

In general, breathwork can positively affect your mental and physical health, and alternate nostril breathing has some particular benefits. Here's what this technique can do for you and why it's worth practicing.

### Relieves stress

Your body can go into "fight or flight" mode even when it's not in imminent danger. Blame it on your sympathetic nervous system, the part of your body responsible for this function, which also activates when you're under stress.

But you can counteract it by activating your parasympathetic nervous system, which plays a huge role in helping you feel calm and relaxed. Breathing techniques like alternate nostril breathing are a great way to do so.

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"When the body is in that relaxed state, it can actually start to heal and repair," Dr. Young says. "Calming our nervous system is so important for our health because we know that stress plays a role in a number of medical conditions."

One study found that after practicing alternate nostril breathing for 12 weeks, male participants reported lower levels of stress. Another study found that this technique helped lower stress in pregnant survivors of intimate partner violence.

### Sharpens your focus and energy

Relaxing your parasympathetic nervous system doesn't necessarily mean becoming so chill that you're a limp noodle. In fact, this particular type of breathwork can leave you feeling surprisingly invigorated.

"Like all breathing techniques, alternate nostril breathing is very calming," Dr. Young says, "but you may also find that it leads you to clearer, brighter concentration and higher levels of energy."

One study found that alternate nostril breathing decreases blood pressure while increasing alertness. (For that reason, this breathing technique isn't your best choice before bed. To lull yourself to sleep, try 4-7-8 breathing instead.)

### Improves your overall breathing

Practicing something makes you better at it — and breathing is no different. "Most of us don't actually breathe as well as we should," Dr. Young says.

But alternate nostril breathing can help. It's been shown to improve cardiorespiratory function, or the way your heart and lungs work together to make sure you're getting enough oxygen. It even helps competitive swimmers maintain respiratory endurance while they're in the water.

## How to do alternate nostril breathing

To start, Dr. Young says, "Take a seat, whether in a chair or the floor. It doesn't matter which you choose, so long as you're sitting up straight and tall."

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The idea of alternate nostril breathing is to isolate each nostril, breathing in through one and exhaling through the other. Here's how to practice this breathing technique:

1. To start, exhale through your mouth, making a "whoosshing" sound.
2. Bring your right hand up to your nose, with your index finger hovering over your left nostril and your thumb hovering over your right nostril.
3. Use your thumb to block your right nostril. Inhale through your left nostril.
4. Use your index finger to block your left nostril. At this point, both nostrils should be held closed.
5. With both nostrils blocked, hold your breath for a beat or two.
6. Release your thumb to unblock your right nostril and exhale.
7. Take a pause at the bottom of your exhale. Then, keeping your left nostril closed, inhale through your right nostril.
8. Use your thumb to block off your right nostril. With both nostrils held closed, hold your breath again for a beat or two.
9. Release your index finger to unblock your left nostril and exhale.

In summary, that's in through your left, out through your right; in through your right, out through your left. Whenever a nostril isn't in use for an inhale or an exhale, it should be held shut with your finger or thumb.

Repeat the process for as long as you like. Dr. Young recommends five minutes at a time.

## Keep it up!

Try to do five minutes of alternate nostril breathing per day to reap the most benefits. But be gentle with yourself if you can't get the hang of it right away.

"It's not always easy to remember or act out the sequence of this particular breathing technique," Dr. Young concedes. "But if you continue to practice it, you will see positive impacts on your health and well-being."

*To hear more on this topic, listen to the Health Essentials Podcast episode, "Breathwork for Beginners." New episodes of the Health Essentials Podcast publish every Wednesday.*

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