

The power of BREATHWORK

Meagan Atcheson explains the basics of breathwork and why it can be beneficial in your cancer journey.

Breathwork vs meditation

Breathwork involves consciously changing your breathing patterns, while meditation typically involves observing your breath without trying to control it.

Both breathwork and meditation incorporate elements of mindfulness, which is paying attention to internal and external sensations and focusing on the present instead of getting caught up in your thoughts.

Something as simple as making your exhale longer than your inhale has been shown to send the body into a more parasympathetic state, lowering blood pressure and cortisol levels, while coherent breathing, a type of long, slow breath, has been associated with a decrease in depressive symptoms.

Benefits of breathwork

According to research, breathwork may:

- Boost mood
- Deepen relaxation
- Help with symptoms of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Improve alertness, focus, and memory
- Increase heart rate variability (a metric associated with longevity, fitness, and mental health)
- Promote creativity
- Promote quality sleep
- Soothe emotions associated with grief and trauma
- Reduce symptoms of anxiety and stress
- Reduce symptoms of asthma

Types of breathwork

Although some kinds of breathwork have been studied more than others, no research suggests certain breathwork techniques are better than others. It's up to you to decide which breathwork exercises work best for you.

4-7-8 breathing

Doing a 4-7-8 breathwork exercise involves inhaling for 4 seconds, holding your breath for 7 seconds, and exhaling for 8 seconds. This is repeated several times.

Alternate nostril breathing

Alternate nostril breathing involves covering one nostril and alternating on each inhale and exhale.

Box breathing

With box breathing, you'll inhale for 4 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds, and then hold your breath again for 4 seconds. Repeat as many times as you like.

Diaphragmatic breathing

For a simple breathwork exercise, try diaphragmatic breathing. It involves breathing while engaging your diaphragm. To practise diaphragmatic breathing, place one hand on your chest and the other hand on your stomach. Take deep breaths, keeping your chest still and allowing your belly to expand fully.

It's a learned skill

If you're trying to do a breathwork exercise, remember that it's a skill. Like any other skill, it gets easier with practise. Remember that everyone's experience with breathwork is different. If you find it anxiety-inducing, consider practising other mindfulness techniques.

Overall, breathwork is a free, low-risk activity that may improve your mental state as well as your physical health.



Meet the expert

Meagan Atcheson is a registered dietitian who focuses specifically in oncology. She is a plant-centric foodie who promotes a nourishing approach to health and wellness using evidence-based research and guidelines only.



How to use breathwork in your cancer journey

By integrating breathwork into cancer care, you can have more control over your body and emotions. Furthermore, practising breathwork can be an empowering self-care technique enabling you to feel more in control of your health and well-being.

Emotions can deeply affect the body, and breathwork can help regulate emotional responses. Moreover, breathwork can help reduce stress, which is common among cancer patients. Chronic stress can harm the body, and breathwork offers a practical method of stress reduction.

Breathwork can also be a helpful tool for managing your pain. Deep breathing has been shown to activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which can help reduce pain perception and promote relaxation. You can use breathwork techniques to supplement traditional pain management strategies, such as medication or physical therapy, to help you reduce your dependence on pain medication.

Patients who practise breathwork consistently over time may experience not only a reduction in pain but also an increase in overall physical comfort and relaxation.

Consistency and regular practise are key to optimising the benefits of breathwork. You can set a regular time each day to practise, such as the morning, before bed, during a break in your treatment schedule, sitting in the chemotherapy chair, while you are having a scan or waiting for results at the doctors' rooms. Finding a quiet, comfortable space can also enhance the effectiveness of the practise.