

BREATHING NATURALLY FROM YOUR CORE

By Michaëlle Edwards

Our breath provides the fuel and foundation for our lives. Though we cannot live for more than a few minutes without it, breathing is subtle. Oftentimes, throughout our day, we are not even aware that we are doing it.

How you breathe can affect your postural alignment, the health of your internal organs, your immune system and the quality of your movements. Your body breathes on its own 15-20,000 times daily stimulated by autonomic signals from your brain stem. Nerves that exit from the neck spine send signals along neural pathways into your diaphragm telling it to contract downwards. This contraction creates a pressure change in your thoracic cavity that makes air rush into your lung tissue. Breathing is the one function in your body that can either be done consciously or unconsciously.

Though most of us know that deep breathing is the key to health and peace of mind, few of us actually have efficient breathing habits. The combination of too much sitting down with an overload of mental stress causes bad postural habits and weakens our breathing muscles. Over time our connective tissue hardens, which further inhibits healthy breathing. Aches and pains and even serious chronic

conditions can arise from the misalignment that accumulates from this cycle.

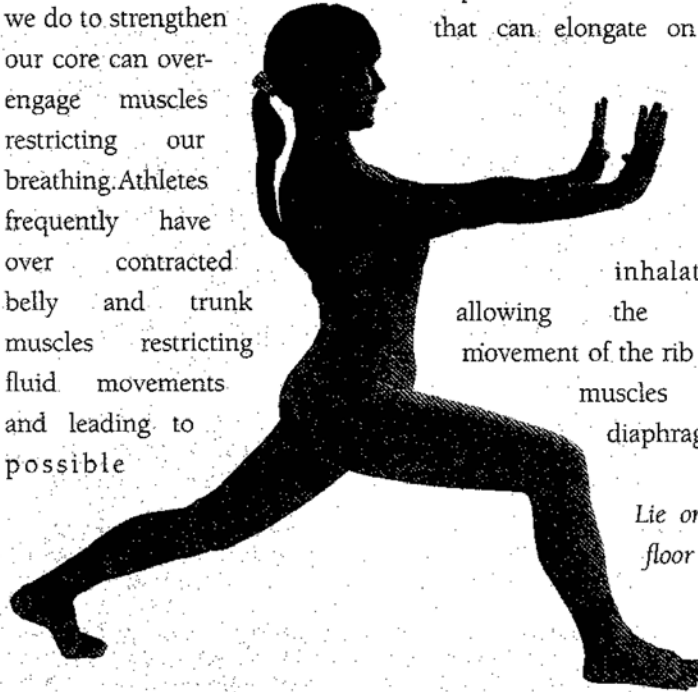
Even some of the exercises we do to strengthen our core can over-engage muscles restricting our breathing. Athletes frequently have over contracted belly and trunk muscles restricting fluid movements and leading to possible

injuries. Unconscious breath holding and tension in our abdomen where our core and gut feelings originate can suppress the nerve centers in our belly that help us relax. Holding the belly perpetuates a sense of fear that can invoke the fight or flight response, keeping our sympathetic nervous system chronically switched on.

So how should we breathe? Many of us have been taught to breathe with our "belly" but this movement is an aberration of natural breathing. Breathing with your belly actually tightens your abdomen and restricts

the deep movements of the diaphragm and rib cage muscles. In order to breathe naturally you must be able to relax your outer belly muscles and allow them to elongate when you inhale. In order to do this, breathing must begin with the movement of the rib cage and not the belly.

Try this core breathing exercise to experience an outer belly that can elongate on the



inhalation, allowing the free movement of the rib cage muscles and diaphragm:

Lie on the floor on

your back with knees bent and feet hip distance apart. Massage the muscles between your ribs. You have two sets of rib cage muscles, the outer and intercostal muscles. Your outer rib muscles engage to pull the ribs apart on inhalation and your inner rib muscles engage on exhalation pulling the ribs back together. In this exercise, you will breathe in through your mouth and out through your nose. Begin by exhaling through the nose feeling how your inner rib cage muscles draw your ribs together while the outer belly pulls in. Inhale as if you are sucking on a straw by making a small opening in your lips like

you are about to whistle. It might be helpful to actually use a straw to help engage your rib muscles. As you breathe in, notice how your outer rib cage muscles engage and pull your ribs apart. This is when the outer belly needs to stretch to allow the diaphragm and inner breathing muscles to pull freely downward. Visualize your entire rib cage inflating like a big balloon so that your ribs expand in all directions.

To feel how the outer belly stretches during inhalation, stand in a lunge with your front knee bent while balancing on the ball of your back foot. Push your hands out in front of you and feel how your outer belly elongates when you inhale using this technique.

Learning to initiate breath from your rib cage can help balance, elongate and tone your body from the inside out. This core breathing can help correct poor posture, jumpstart your metabolism, massage your organs and can even make you a better lover. Conscious breathing is a powerful way to connect with our deeper selves, but it is important that we do it in a way that supports our natural breathing process. ●

Michaëlle Edwards is the creator of YOGALIGN™ and the author of the upcoming book *Pain-free Yoga from Your Core*. Michaëlle teaches classes on Kaua'i at her north shore studio, and leads workshops on the mainland and in Canada. She is now offering a 200-hour Yoga Alliance-approved yoga teacher training program in fall 2008. See her website at www.manayoga.com