



Abdominal breathing

This leaflet aims to help you practice abdominal breathing to improve your breath control for a better voice. It is a reminder as to what you have done in the practical session.

What is abdominal breathing?

Abdominal breathing or diaphragmatic breathing is a natural way to breathe. Various factors can disrupt our breathing pattern, such as respiratory conditions, stress and neurological causes. Becoming aware of our breathing and practising abdominal breathing can help improve breath control.

Why is improving breath control important for using the voice?

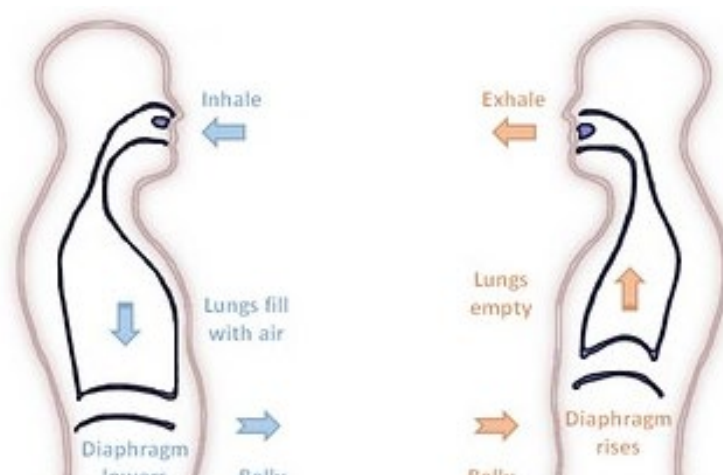
Our breathing *powers* the voice. Our vocal folds are located at the top of the airway. When we breathe, the vocal cords open (abduct) to allow the air to pass through. When we voice, the vocal cords close (adduct) trapping the air and causing vibrations. For continuous sound, the vocal cords move in a rhythmic wave as the air continues to pass between them.

Effective abdominal breathing will help your voice by creating sufficient air pressure under the vocal cords. This will promote a powerful voice and help to avoid a strained or weak voice quality. It is also thought to promote a more relaxed state of being overall.

Abdominal breathing exercises

Please practise the exercises that your speech and language therapist has recommended.

As we breathe in, the diaphragm muscle contracts allowing air to enter the lungs. As we breathe out, the diaphragm relaxes to allow air to leave the lungs. The exercises below help us to focus on this breathing pattern, by feeling the movement of the breath.



What happens during abdominal breathing

Exercise 1: Become aware of your breathing pattern (sitting)

- Sit upright in a comfortable position with your feet flat on the floor.
- Let yourself breathe out....and in...
- Repeat this several times, becoming aware of the air flow as you breathe out...and in.
- Notice any areas of tension in your body and allow the muscles in these areas to soften. Relax your shoulders. Breathe in a way that feels comfortable and easy to you.
- Notice if you are breathing via your nose or your mouth. Try to breathe in and out via your nose if you can.

Exercise 2: Abdominal breathing (sitting)

- Now rest your hands gently on your abdomen, just under your ribs, above your belly button.
- Breathe out...and in....
- Next, focus on breathing out via your mouth.....and in via your nose. Pause. Repeat.
- Out via your mouth...and in via your nose. Pause.
- Out via your mouth...and in via your nose. Pause.
- Notice that as you exhale, your hand moves gently inwards towards your spine...and as you exhale, your hand is pushed outwards, away from your spine. This is not a large movement, but as you breathe more deeply, you can feel it more so.

Exercise 3: Abdominal breathing (lying down to sitting)

- Lie comfortably and relaxed on a flat surface.
- Rest your hands or a light book on your abdomen.
- Breathe comfortably out through your mouth and in through your nose.
- Notice that your abdomen rises as you breathe in and falls as you breathe out.

Now sit up.

- Continue to feel your abdomen rise and fall as you breathe in and out.
- Look in a mirror. Avoid moving your shoulders up as you breathe in or out. Keep them in a relaxed position. Your abdomen should be the main area with movement as you breathe out and in.

Exercise 4: Extending the breath out

- Breathe in (via the nose) to a count of 3 and out (via the mouth) to a count of 4.....repeat several times.
- Then breathe in for a count of 3 and out for a count of 5...repeat several times.
- Then breathe in for a count of 3 and out for a count of 6...repeat several times
- Keep extending the counts on the outbreath, until you reach 10.
- Only exhale for as long as is comfortable for you. Do not strain at the end of a breath.

Exercise 5: Sustained voiceless sounds

Voiceless sounds do not actively involve the voice box. They are produced as air from your lungs moves freely out of your mouth. Your tongue, lips and teeth help to shape the sound type. Therefore, your throat muscles can remain relaxed throughout this activity.

- Breathe in (via the nose) to a count of 3, then exhale on a prolonged “sssssss” sound as you breathe out. Repeat 5 times.
- Practise extending the length of this sound and do not forget to allow yourself time between each repetition to breath back in via the nose, to replenish the air.
- Repeat the exercise with sounds “shshshshshsh” and “fffffffff”.
- Ensure you are not straining the end of a breath.
- Keep checking that you are still using the abdominal breathing, placing your hand gently on your abdomen.

Exercise 6: Sustained voiced sounds

Repeat exercise 4 with the following sounds, which involve vibration of your vocal cords:

“zzzzzzzz”

“vvvvvvvv”

“jjjjjjjjj” (This sound is as if you are prolonging the sound that occurs in the words “edge”, “measure”).

- Ensure you are not straining the end of a breath.
- Keep checking that you are still using abdominal breathing.

Exercise 7: Volume practice

Our diaphragm plays an important role in increasing the air pressure required for a louder voice. Try to maximise the use of your diaphragm as opposed to straining from your throat.

Use the sounds from exercise 4 to vary volume:

- For example:
SSSSSSSSssssssss gradually quieter
ssssssssSSSSSS gradually louder
ssssSSSSssssSSSS quiet-loud-quiet-loud
- Now do the same with the sounds from exercise 5. For example:
ZZZZZZzzzzzzzz gradually quieter
zzzzZZZZZZZZ gradually louder
zzzzZZzzzzZZ quiet-loud-quiet-loud

Exercise 8: Speak using abdominal breathing

- Read aloud a paragraph of text. Slow the rate of your speech to help monitor your breath. Make sure you pause to top up your breath as you need to.
- Have a conversation with someone. Slow the rate of your speech to help monitor your breath. Allow time to take in another breath when you need to. You may find it helps to keep your hand gently rested on your abdomen to be aware of deeper breathing.
- Try and breathe in via the nose as much as possible.

Additional exercises to help practise abdominal breathing

Imagine you are blowing up a giant balloon (to feel abdomen collapse)

- Make sure you are sitting in a relaxed, upright position.
- As you blow out, to blow up the balloon, feel your abdomen collapses inwards. Your chest and shoulders should remain relaxed.

Blow out an imaginary candle (to help feel muscle contraction)

- Make sure you are sitting in a relaxed, upright position.
- Imagine a candle in front of you. Blow out the candle with short bursts of air.
- Feel your abdominal muscles tighten on each burst of air.
- Repeat using an ‘sss’ sound: sss – sss – sss.

Extending length of sentence (to encourage deeper breathing)

A windy day.

A cold, windy day.

A cold, wet and windy day in winter.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing the trees.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing the trees as she walked.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing the trees as she walked in the park.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing the trees as she walked in the park with her dog.

It was a very cold, wet and windy day in winter and the wind was blowing the trees as she walked in the park with her dog Max and the puppies.

Use a pencil to mark the points in each sentence where you need to take a breath. As you practice try to get further through the sentences using bigger, abdominal breaths.

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To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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Next review due: September 2027.