

BREATHWORK

FAST FACTS

- Breathwork is a commonly used therapy in the military. It is known to ease symptoms of fear and anxiety and help with trauma-related illnesses like post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Breathwork can significantly decrease the risk of developing heart disease by decreasing one of its major risk factors, high blood pressure.
- Breathwork is part of many mind-body practices, including yoga, meditation, tai chi, qi gong and guided imagery.

WHAT IS BREATHWORK?

Breathwork is a practice or treatment that involves consciously controlling your breathing. This is done to change your physical or mental, emotional, and spiritual reactions or condition. Controlling your breathing helps you focus your mind, detach from immediate reactions, and create a sense of calm. It can also slow down your heart rate, lower your blood pressure and reduce levels of a stress hormone called cortisol.

WHAT CONDITIONS DOES BREATHWORK TREAT?

Breathwork can help create whole person health for people with a variety of conditions. It has been used for:

- Anxiety
- Asthma
- Chronic pain
- Anger
- Depression
- Trauma and post-traumatic stress
- Grief and loss
- Emotional effects of physical illness
- Insomnia
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Labor pain
- High blood pressure
- Irritable bowel syndrome symptoms
- Smoking cessation
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Other conditions

Breathwork can also help you create whole person health even if you're not sick or in pain. Breathwork has been shown to alter:

- Immune system
- Stress levels
- Metabolism
- Quality of life
- Emotions

BREATHWORK AND CANCER TREATMENT

Recent research has demonstrated several potential benefits of breathwork for people with cancer, including

- Pain management — A 2024 study found that just 20 minutes of mindful breathing can rapidly reduce the intensity and unpleasantness of cancer pain.¹
- Symptom relief — Slow pursed lip breathing helped with post-surgical pain in cancer patients, while slow deep breathing and another technique helped children with cancer.² Yogic breathing may help with sleep problems, anxiety, and quality of life during chemotherapy.³
- Stress relief — Breathwork can help people relax and reduce stress, which may be especially helpful during cancer treatment.⁴

Specific techniques studied in people with cancer include mindful breathing, yoga breathing (such as alternate nostril breathing), breathing out slowly through pursed lips and “Hey-Hu” breathing, which involves specific sounds.

Breathwork can be an important part of whole person health for people with cancer, during and after treatment. Of course, always talk with your cancer team before starting any new treatments.

Is there evidence that breathwork works?

In the last 20 years, as patients increasingly integrate complementary and alternative medicine into their treatment plans, more and more literature is being published exploring the impact breathwork has on treating symptoms of certain conditions.

- Healthy males who engaged in slow breathing exercises for 12 weeks had significantly less perceived stress and improved cardiovascular functioning.¹
- A systematic review looking at the impact of breathing exercises on participants with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) who participated in 16 randomized control trials found that patients with COPD who engaged in breathing exercises for over 4 to 15 weeks improved their ability to engage in and tolerate exercise.²
- Healthy adults who participated in 20 intensive sessions of diaphragmatic breathing exercises had improved sustained attention, decreased stress hormones and increased positive mood.³
- Children (ages 6-14) with moderate to severe anxiety who participated in a 12-week relaxation-breathing program had decreased anxiety levels which improved children's asthma related symptoms.⁴

If you or your health care provider would like to explore more research on breathwork's impact on a particular health concern, visit: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=breathing+exercises

Are there precautions, side effects or safety concerns I should be aware of before I start breathwork?

Breathwork is widely considered a safe way of addressing physical and mental symptoms. Side effects are rare.

Precautions

- Although rare, there have been reports that engaging in breathwork has made some mental health conditions worse. If you have a mental condition, talk with your doctor about breathwork before trying it. You may also want to start under supervision by a licensed breathwork practitioner. If you are attending a breathwork class, please make sure to alert your instructor about your condition.
- Excessively rapid breathing can drop carbon dioxide levels and change the pH of the blood. This can cause muscle cramps and, on rare occasions, seizures. If you tend to have seizures, talk with your doctor before trying intense breathwork.

How often should I see a breathwork practitioner? How long is each session?

How often and how long depends on why you are using breathwork and the type you are doing. Classes or an individual session with a practitioner can run anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. Many practitioners will encourage you to start a daily breathwork or meditation practice in addition to attending your breathwork sessions.

Can I start breathwork on my own?

If you do not have a history of severe mental illness or seizures, you can start on your own. Apps like Headspace and Calm are available to help with breathwork practice. Research has shown that online programs can give you the same benefits as an in-person program.⁵

What training or certifications do breathwork practitioners have?

Training and certification for breathwork practitioners vary. The practice is not formally regulated in the United States. Many independent organizations offer training and certification to people who take their courses or meet their qualifications. Before working with a breathwork practitioner, ask about their qualifications and do some research on the organization where they earned them.

The following websites can help you ask the right questions and address the training qualifications before you start working with any breathwork practitioner.

Global Professional Breathwork Alliance

- breathworkalliance.com/member-directory/certified-schools – The Global Professional Breathwork Alliance has standardized the requirements needed to become a breathwork practitioner and certifies different breathwork training schools. To find out more about their requirements and how they certify particular breathwork schools, visit: breathworkalliance.com/training-standards

How do I find breathwork classes near me?

Depending on the type of breathwork services you are seeking, please visit: breathworkalliance.com/certified-practitioners

Many hospitals and clinics offer breathwork and relaxation techniques. Talk with your doctor or health care team or visit the hospital or clinic's website to learn more.

How much will seeing a breathwork practitioner cost me?

The cost varies based on location, provider and extent of services needed. If you have membership at a gym or spa, check to see if it includes free or discounted breathwork classes that meet your needs.

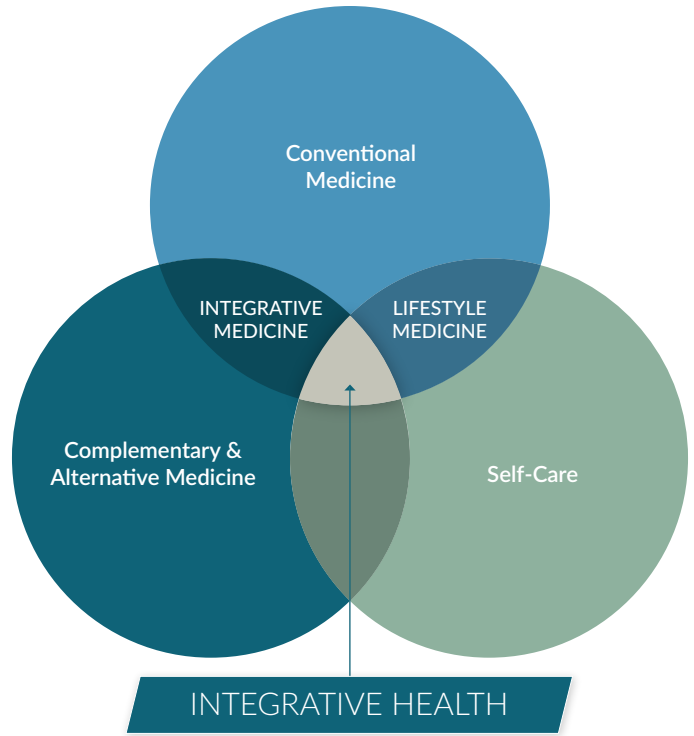
Will my insurance company pay for breathwork sessions?

Not usually. Visit the [National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health](http://NationalCenterforComplementaryandIntegrativeHealth) to learn more about paying for whole person health treatments.

Should I tell my primary care provider that I am seeing a breathwork practitioner?

Yes. Tell your primary care doctor or other health care provider, or your cancer team, that you want to try breathwork. Ask if you need to be aware of anything in particular that could affect your health or breathwork practice. They may also be able to recommend a breathwork practitioner or classes near you.

My notes and questions



References:

1. Tan SB, Chai CS, Ng DLC, Zainuddin SI, Capelle DP, Lam CL, Ang CM, Chai WL, Ishak NNN, Ong YX, Ngu YX. Mindful breathing for cancer pain: efficacy of a single 20-minute session - a randomised controlled study. *BMJ Support Palliat Care*. 2024 Aug 20:spcare-2023-004762.
2. Wang H, Liu XL, Wang T, Tan JB, Huang H. Breathing Exercises for Pain Management in Cancer Survivors: A Systematic Review. *Pain Manag Nurs*. 2023 Jun;24(3):299-310.
3. Dhruva A, Miaskowski C, Abrams D, Acree M, Cooper B, Goodman S, Hecht FM. Yoga breathing for cancer chemotherapy-associated symptoms and quality of life: results of a pilot randomized controlled trial. *J Altern Complement Med*. 2012 May;18(5):473-9.
4. Warren GW, Balasubramanian S. A quality improvement study on the feasibility and potential benefits of a yogic breathing program for cancer survivors and caregivers during treatment in a lodging facility. *Brain Behav Immun Integr*. 2023 Jul;3:100019.
5. Naik GS, Gaur GS, Pal GK. Effect of modified slow breathing exercise on perceived stress and basal cardiovascular parameters. *Int J Yoga*. 2018 Jan-Apr;11(1):53-58.
6. Holland AE, Hill CJ, Jones AY, McDonald CF. Breathing exercises for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*. 2012 Oct 17;10(10):CD008250.
7. Ma X, Yue ZQ, Gong ZQ, Zhang H, Duan NY, Shi YT, Wei GX, Li YF. The Effect of diaphragmatic breathing on attention, negative affect and stress in healthy adults. *Front Psychol*. 2017 Jun 6;8:874.
8. Chiang LC, Ma WF, Huang JL, Tseng LF, Hsueh KC. Effect of relaxation-breathing training on anxiety and asthma signs/symptoms of children with moderate-to-severe asthma: a randomized controlled trial. *Int J Nurs Stud*. 2009 Aug;46(8):1061-70.
9. Spijkerman MP, Pots WT, Bohlmeijer ET. Effectiveness of online mindfulness-based interventions in improving mental health: A review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials. *Clin Psychol Rev*. 2016 Apr;45:102-14.