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Are you deep or shallow?

Many of us don't realise that the way we breathe can undermine our health. Peta Bee picks up some tips from the 'breath guru'

Of all the things we would like to think we have mastered, breathing is probably the most basic. For most of us, the whole oxygen in, carbon dioxide out process requires so little thought that we do it unconsciously. There are fleeting moments when we are forced to gasp or catch our breath and the rhythm is thrown off kilter, but we never doubt that normality will resume and that our chest will rise and fall with its usual monotony before long.

Should we, though, be more mindful about the way we breathe? A growing number of specialists in mind-body medicine suggest that few of us do it properly and that re-educating ourselves on how to breathe is the simplest way to boost health and fitness.

Many of the common ailments that we attribute to stress or diet, the specialists claim, may actually be linked to the way we breathe. If you find yourself sighing when you don't feel tired, it's not boredom that's to blame but your respiratory fitness. Feel tired when all you've done is sit down all day? Again, your inefficient breathing could be the reason.

Until now, it's been mainly athletes and singers who have dedicated time to breathing practice, but a swell of opinion suggests that the rest of us should be doing the same. One expert trying to raise our respiratory awareness is Alan Dolan, who teaches an approach called transformational

breathing. This had hippy roots in California 30 years ago but has now gone mainstream and counts celebrities including Goldie Hawn and Deepak Chopra, a leading wellbeing expert, among its fans.

Dolan, who calls himself the "breath guru", says that too many people believe that good breathing is a case of sucking in the stomach and pushing out the chest. But this, he says, is wrong. "If you breathe from the chest, as many people do, you use only a fraction of your lungs' capacity. Shallow breathing such as that can cause a build-up of stress, muscle tension and a fast respiration rate, which means the body does not operate at its most efficient."

What athletes and singers have long known, he says, is that the abdomen should expand during inhalation to provide a maximum oxygen shot that will nourish and energise every cell in the body. "It's not rocket science to make the connection between more oxygen and better human performance," Dolan says.

In a transformational breathing session with him, I am instructed to recline on a pile of cushions and close my eyes while resting my hands on my abdomen. To make sure that my mouth stays open and I breathe through it (rather than my nose), Dolan puts the top half of a plastic bottle in my mouth and tells me to inhale deeply, inflating my abdomen like a balloon. I then have to take a second breath inwards so that my stomach rises even farther. Exhalation, he says, should be rapid. I continue with this double intake of ▶

