
Breathing in Pilates

‘Breathing is the first act of life and the last. Our very life depends on it’

Who would think breathing could be so complicated, so difficult to learn?

Learn??? I have been breathing all my life what’s to learn?

Plenty.

Most of us tend to breathe very shallow breaths. We keep our respiration in our upper chests. This is the type of breathing that increases our adrenaline and stress. It is fight or flight breathing. Pilates has many benefits that our typical breathing does not give us. Pilates breathing relaxes tensions in our bodies, give us a better exchange and use our abdominals. It helps not only with the body, but also the mind (and some would say - spirit).

What is breathing?

Breathing supplies oxygen to the body, eliminates carbon dioxide and regulates the body PH balance.

The Inhale

Breathing in through the nose warms the air and filters it through the cilia (small hairs in the nostrils). The breath then moves through a series of branches (bronchioles) that looks like an upside down tree. The diaphragm is at the base of the rib cage at the thoracic area. As we breathe the diaphragm contracts and relaxes. The Pilates breath tries to get the diaphragm to move across the ribs going downward during the inhale allowing space for the air to fill the lungs. It looks like a hammock attached to the ribs. The inhale also gives you a great stretch of the muscles in between the ribs (inter-costals).

The Pilates exhale

Stitching the ribs together causes the diaphragm to move like an arch up. This forces the air out and contracts the abdominals connected to the ribs.

Full breathing

As your breathing improves you will feel the muscles between the ribs stretch on the inhale and the abdominals contract on the exhale. Over time you will also feel your abdominal muscles working when you inhale by keeping the abdominals connected as the breath goes out into the lungs and rib cage.

When to breathe

Often in exercise we should breathe out on exertion or effort. You may have heard people say “exhale with exertion”. In Pilates the breath can be a little different. Many forms of Pilates have the breath co-ordinated with the movement of the spine. In beginning exercises sometimes this is not followed as it is difficult to maintain abdominal engagement on an inhale.

The most important thing is to breathe. If you get confused do not hold your breath, keep breathing and always begin the breath before the movement.

Principles of Breathing

- Do not hold your breath
- Keep breathing flowing
- Inhale through the air to cleanse air
- Exhale through the mouth
- Exhale completely
- Breathe into your back and sides of ribs
- Relax your jaw and tongue, neck and shoulders
- Do not let shoulders rise on inhale
- Hollow abdominals pull navel to spine on exhale
- Zip or stitch ribs together on the exhale
- Try zipping down and zipping up
- Try to breathe at least five seconds each way
- Exhale to flex/round spine
- Inhale to extend/arch spine
- Exhale to move legs and arms away from the body (typically in mat work varies)

Sample exercises

Notice your breath pattern. Sit, stand or lie on a mat. Notice where your breath goes. Place your hands on your rib cage, under your rib cage, under your chest, ribs or belly?

Balloon breath. Sit, stand or lie on a mat. Imagine you have two balloons encased in your lower rib cage. As you inhale try to fill up the balloons. As you exhale try to get all the air out of the balloon. Feel the balloons deflate, then fill them right back up with your inhale. Make sure you feel your balloons fill out to the sides and backs of your ribs.

Flexed over hugging knees. Exhale ; try to pull your belly away from your legs. Inhale; try to feel the breath go into your back, expanding and stretching the back rib cage.

Face down. Lie prone (face down) with hands under head, nose hovering above mat. Inhale into your back. Exhale; pull navel away from floor, about the size of a marble up off the floor with your belly button. Do not use your bottom or your back, just your abs.

Scoop it out. Lie on your back with your legs bent, feet on the floor. Place your hands just below your belly button. As you exhale try to move your abs away from your hands. Inhale into your ribs and back, try to keep the belly from rising, instead pull the belly button in and up, feel the ribs stretch your diaphragm out like a hammock stretching further and further from each end.

Be patient and keep up with it. It will become more natural over time.

****Please check with your doctor before starting this or any exercise programme and always inform your instructor if you have an injuries.**