



Anaesthesia, Surgery
and Critical Care

North Bristol **NHS**
NHS Trust

The Pain Management Programme: Diaphragmatic Breathing



Exceptional healthcare, personally delivered

Diaphragmatic Breathing

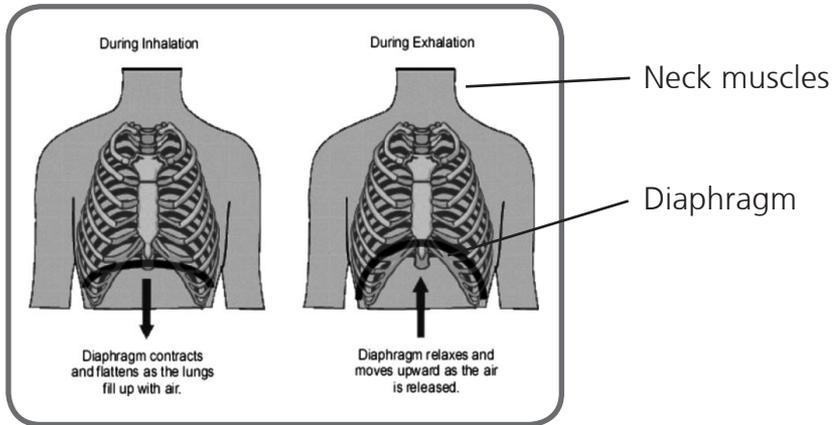
During the process of breathing it is possible to use different sets of muscles around the chest and abdomen to allow the lungs to fill with air. It is not uncommon for many of us to use our shoulders, upper chest and muscles around the neck in order to do this, especially if we are more tense or anxious. This way of breathing means that the lungs are not used to their full capacity (only the upper portions of the lungs will be inflated) and that more energy is used during the process of breathing.

Diaphragmatic breathing can provide us with an antidote to this situation by encouraging us to breathe from the diaphragm and therefore help us to be more relaxed. Singers, actors, divers, yoga and martial arts enthusiasts often use this method to improve their lung capacity and enhance their technique.

The key benefits of diaphragmatic breathing are:

- It helps to aid relaxation by slowing the breathing rate and allowing the shoulders and neck to feel more relaxed.
- It helps to focus the mind on the breathing process thus taking the attention away from pain or other stressors and is therefore a useful distraction strategy.
- It helps to reverse some of the physical symptoms of anxiety.
- It can help to improve energy levels.

The diaphragm is the most efficient breathing muscle. It is a large dome-shaped muscle that separates the lungs and heart above it from the stomach and other internal organs below. To allow the lower zones of the lungs to be inflated when breathing in the diaphragm needs to be active. One sign of this happening is the natural outward expansion of the belly/abdomen as you breathe in. Letting the breath out will allow the belly/abdomen to naturally retract and deflate. It is possible to begin practising this technique whilst standing, lying or sitting.



Lying Down:

- Lie on your back on a flat surface, keep the knees bent and head supported. Use a pillow under the knees to support the legs if preferred.
- Place one hand on your chest and the other below your rib cage on your abdomen.
- Breathe in slowly through the nose allowing your belly to move out gently against your hand. Try to keep the chest and the other hand relaxed. Imagine the air is being drawn down into your abdomen.
- Some people find it helpful to pause for a couple of seconds.
- Breathe out slowly and feel your abdomen draw in towards your back.



Sitting Down:

- Sit upright and well supported with knees bent and both feet on the floor, shoulders, head and neck relaxed.
- Then follow the instructions above.



Standing Up:

- Stand with your feet shoulder width apart and your weight evenly distributed in each foot. Ensure your shoulders are relaxed.
- Continue as above.

Remember, it may take a while to get used to this technique. The aim is to make small changes to your breathing over a period of time by gradually re-engaging the diaphragm with the breathing process. Once it becomes more natural this technique can be practised when walking, sitting in a traffic jam, lying in the dentist's chair etc etc.

**PATIENT
APPROVED** 

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If you or the individual you are caring for need support reading this leaflet please ask a member of staff for advice.

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