

What does breathing and posture have to do with the way you sing?

Your breathing muscles are attached to your skeletal frame. If your body is out of balance or alignment you cannot perform skilled breathing which is necessary for singing. It makes sense to create a balanced body before learning anything else.

What is the difference between breathing and skilled breathing?

You already know how to breathe, it is one very important element of sustaining life! The way we are taught to breathe from an early age is adequate to oxygenate our bodies and to support everyday speech. This type of breathing is called "tidal" breathing. It is very shallow and high in the lungs. It isn't adequate however to sustain skilled singing.

There are 4 types of breathing co-ordinations.

1. 1. Ceiling Breathing

This is another way to describe "tidal" breathing. It is called ceiling breathing because the air fills up in the top half of the lungs. This causes the chest and shoulders to move vertically when breathing. This type of breathing causes unnecessary muscles in your throat to contract, affecting vocal efficiency.

Do this....

Pretend you have just gone for a quick run (or actually do it!). Notice what happens to your chest and shoulders. Are you using any neck and throat muscles?

1. 2. Floor Breathing

You may have heard the expression "breathe from the diaphragm". This is a very common phrase used by many vocal coaches. It is slightly misleading to use this phrase when learning how to sing because you can't actually "fill" your diaphragm with air. It is quite common for a singer (and sometimes teacher!) to take a breath in and say "that's my diaphragm" while pointing to their expanded abdominal area. This is untrue because you can't actually see or even sense your diaphragm. So what is this "mysterious" muscle?

The diaphragm is a domed shaped muscle that is attached to the bottom of your lungs. As you breathe in, the diaphragm descends so that it "flattens out" at the bottom of your rib cage. It is this action that terms "floor breathing", as the air is sent to the bottom of your lungs. As the diaphragm returns to its resting position air is exhaled.

When the diaphragm "flattens out" it pushes the contents of your abdomen down and out. This expansion of the abdomen gives the effect of the stomach filling up with air.

Do this....

Stand with proper posture. Put your hand over your stomach. Do a series of short "sh" sounds. The goal is to make your stomach move your hand. See if you can now do the same exercise doing a pant. Gradually increase the speed of the pant. It is important that you relax your abdominal muscles. If you tighten these muscles the diaphragm cannot descend and flatten out. This is a very common reason students struggle to develop floor breathing. As a result ceiling and wall breathing will occur.

1. 3. Wall Breathing

As the diaphragm flattens out it shifts the abdominal contents. It also forces the lower ribs to expand.

This expansion and contraction of the rib cage is termed wall breathing.

Do this....

Place your hands under the bottom of your ribs. Experiment by taking a couple of normal breaths, and then larger breaths. During the larger breaths you should feel the lower ribs move out slightly.

So what breathing co-ordination is the best for singing?

1. **4. A combination of floor and wall breathing.**

Do this....

Sit on a chair or on the floor. Pull your knees up to your chest and wrap your arms around your legs for support. Take a couple of normal breaths. Focus the air to your pelvic area making sure that you relax your abs. As the air fills up from the "floor" notice your lower ribs engage and expand. You should also feel the muscles in your lower back stretch as well. Now take a more energized breath. As you exhale make a "sh" sound. Repeat this process 3 times.

Return to a standing position. Adopt your correct posture and try to emulate the combination breath while standing. It is important to maintain a high sternum on the exhale. Collapsing will force the air out. Controlling the breath is the key to skilled breathing.

How did you go?

If you are having trouble, go back and repeat the other exercises. Remember muscles have memory and if repeated enough the co-ordination will become automatic. You don't want to be thinking "what are my abs doing right now" in the middle of a performance!

Now is a great time to talk about breath inhalation. Have you taken notice of how a singer breathes? Hearing the breath can destroy a musical phrase. Some singers use an audible breath to add an effect to their sound. That is fine if it is used for style purposes, but generally it is pretty annoying.

Large audible breaths tend to activate "ceiling" breathing. That breathy sound that you hear is air rushing through your vocal folds. I will discuss the vocal folds in more depth in the next lesson. This rush of air puts the folds under pressure. Too much pressure and the use of unnecessary muscles in the throat will create tension. Tension is the singer's biggest enemy.

Learn to take a silent breath when singing. Breathe in a relaxed and open manner. This will:

1. ***Feel better***
2. ***Sound better***

Do this....

Take 3 large audible breaths. Notice the feeling and the sound.

Now take 3 natural silent breaths. Notice the sense of ease and openness.

This time inhale over a 5 second period. You can choose to breathe through the nose or mouth or both. It doesn't matter which option you choose, just make sure it is silent and free. Be aware that you are "filling up" from the floor first, and then your ribs will engage.

The Exhale

You can control the amount of air you exhale while singing. It is commonly called "**breath control**".

So far you have learnt how to co-ordinate your body to breathe, you have learnt to take a silent breath. To complete the cycle you need to learn how to control the amount of air that is leaving your lungs. You don't have to push the air out. Your body is already accustomed to exhaling air so no added force is needed to "push" it out.

Do this....

Adopt your correct posture. Take a silent breath in over 5 seconds. On the exhale, make a "shh" sound. Make the exhale last as long as the inhale. A common mistake that singers make is collapsing the sternum on the exhale. This will force the air out quickly resulting in lack of breath. **Keep the sternum and chest high** and resist the urge to collapse.

There are muscles that control the exhale. They are located in the abdominal wall and rib cage. You can condition these muscles to enhance your breath control by including stretching into your daily vocal regime. A full vocal warm will be the topic in another article.

There is an exercise to develop breath control that has been used for centuries by famous classical singers. I will refer to this exercise as "**Breath Pacing**". It is very similar to the exercise you have just learnt, but with a small addition.

Do this....

Inhale on a silent breath for 5 seconds.

Suspend the breath for 5 seconds. When I say "suspend" I mean hold the breath with your mouth open.

Exhale using a "shh" for 5 seconds.

Repeat this cycle 3 times.

When you get comfortable with 5 seconds do the cycle with 10 second sections. Over time you will be able to increase this up to 30 seconds and above.

I hope you enjoyed this Interactive Article on breathing. I encourage you to invest your time mastering breathing and breath pacing.

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