

Diaphragmatic Breathing & Mindful Eating: Tools for Better Digestion and Stress Relief

Our bodies function best when they are in a parasympathetic state, often referred to as the "rest and digest" phase. Unfortunately, many of us spend much of our time in the sympathetic state, which is the "fight or flight" response, causing stress and inhibiting digestion. Practices like diaphragmatic breathing and mindful eating can help us shift out of this stress-dominant state and promote better health, including improved digestion.

1. Diaphragmatic Breathing (Also Known as Belly Breathing)

What is it?

Diaphragmatic breathing is a deep breathing technique that engages the diaphragm, a large muscle located at the bottom of your ribcage. By breathing deeply and fully, you bring more oxygen into your lungs and activate the parasympathetic nervous system, helping your body relax and shift out of the stress (sympathetic) state.

How It Helps Digestive Health:

- **Reduces Stress:** Activating the parasympathetic nervous system decreases the production of stress hormones (like cortisol) that can disrupt digestion.
- **Improves Oxygen Flow to Organs:** Deep breathing increases blood and oxygen flow to the digestive organs, supporting efficient digestion.
- **Promotes Relaxation:** Breathing deeply signals to your body that it's safe, which helps your body prioritize digestion over other functions like fight or flight responses.
- **Relieves Bloating & Gas:** Slower, deeper breaths help relax the muscles of the abdomen, which can reduce feelings of bloating and discomfort.

How to Practice Diaphragmatic Breathing:

1. **Find a comfortable position:** Sit or lie down in a relaxed posture.
 2. **Place your hands on your abdomen:** One hand on your chest and the other on your belly.
 3. **Inhale slowly and deeply:** Breathe in through your nose, letting your diaphragm (not just your chest) expand. Your belly should rise.
 4. **Exhale slowly:** Let the air out through your mouth or nose, allowing your belly to fall.
 5. **Repeat** for 5–10 minutes, several times a day, or before meals to promote calm and improve digestion.
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2. Mindful Eating

What is it?

Mindful eating involves focusing fully on the eating experience, paying attention to the taste, texture, smell, and appearance of food, as well as how it makes you feel. It's about eating with intention, being present, and listening to your body's hunger and satiety cues.

How It Helps Digestive Health:

- **Improves Digestion:** By eating slowly and mindfully, you give your body time to properly prepare for digestion, including the release of digestive enzymes and stomach acids.
- **Prevents Overeating:** Paying attention to hunger and fullness cues helps you avoid overeating, which can cause bloating, indigestion, and discomfort.
- **Reduces Stress on the Gut:** Eating in a relaxed and present state allows the body to fully engage the parasympathetic nervous system, promoting better digestion and nutrient absorption.
- **Helps You Tune In to Food Sensitivities:** Mindful eating allows you to better recognize which foods might be causing discomfort or adverse reactions.

How to Practice Mindful Eating:

1. **Eat Without Distractions:** Turn off the TV, put away your phone, and sit down at the table. Focus solely on your meal.
2. **Engage Your Senses:** Before eating, take a moment to observe your food. Notice its colour, texture, and aroma. Engage fully in the eating experience.
3. **Chew Slowly and Thoroughly:** Chew each bite 20-30 times, allowing the body to break down food and begin the digestion process in the mouth.
4. **Pause Between Bites:** Set your utensil down between bites and take a moment to check in with how full you feel.
5. **Pay Attention to Fullness Cues:** Eat until you are satisfied, not until you are full. Aim to leave the table feeling comfortably nourished, not overly full.

How These Practices Help You Shift Out of Sympathetic Dominance

When we are in the **sympathetic nervous system (SNS)** state, our bodies are primed for stress: increased heart rate, heightened alertness, and energy diverted away from processes like digestion. This can lead to issues like poor digestion, bloating, and even malabsorption.

By practicing **diaphragmatic breathing** and **mindful eating**, we activate the **parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)**, which is responsible for "rest and digest" activities. When the PNS is engaged:

- **Digestion improves** because the body can properly focus on nutrient absorption and breaking down food.
- **Stress hormones** (like cortisol) decrease, allowing the body to enter a more relaxed and balanced state.
- **Gut motility and enzyme production** are supported, preventing issues like constipation, bloating, and indigestion.

Tips for Incorporating These Practices Into Your Day

- **Before meals:** Spend 2–5 minutes practicing diaphragmatic breathing to calm your mind and body before you eat.
- **During meals:** Practice mindful eating by chewing slowly, being present, and engaging all your senses.
- **After meals:** Sit or walk slowly for a few minutes, keeping the parasympathetic state active to help with digestion.

By regularly practicing diaphragmatic breathing and mindful eating, you can significantly enhance your digestive health, reduce stress, and improve overall well-being.