

TAKE A DEEP BREATH

Breathing, of course, keeps us alive. We do it 18 times per minute, 1,080 times an hour and 25,920 times a day – barely giving it a second thought. 'But we've forgotten how to breathe properly,' says chartered physiotherapist Sammy Margo. And this has an effect on both our physical and psychological state.

We all know eating well and exercising are essential for optimum health, but just breathing properly can unleash an avalanche of benefits – calming stress, improving digestion, boosting energy and vitality, and helping us sleep more soundly. Ultimately, breathing properly can make us feel happier and more confident. Evidence even suggests that it can help to prevent headaches and protect against asthma and back pain.

So what's gone wrong? 'We're leading increasingly sedentary lives, sitting slumped for hours, which compresses the base of the lungs,' Margo explains. 'This leads to shallow upper airway breathing, which is extremely inefficient. When we breathe, we exchange vital gases – taking in oxygen and nutrients, and expelling carbon dioxide and other waste substances. But shallow breathing means we don't take in enough oxygen or expel carbon dioxide properly, which can make us feel lethargic and low.'

And the chronic stress most of us are under only makes things worse. 'When we feel stressed, our breathing alters,' says Linda Blair, clinical psychologist and author of *Straight Talking* (£10.99, Piatkus). 'Modern lifestyles tend to mean we get anxious and uptight about relatively minor but frequent irritations, like traffic jams and emails, but our body senses danger and thinks we're preparing to fight for our lives or sprint for safety. We quickly breathe in more oxygen for rapid distribution to our muscles,

making our hearts pound and leaving us hot, sweaty, breathless and nauseous. This response happens far too

Breathing correctly is vital to our health and happiness, but a cocktail of stress, inactivity and poor posture is taking its toll on our breathing habits...

often and disrupts our breathing patterns every time, so to calm down we must learn how to rebalance our breathing.'

Blair believes we'd all benefit from taking time to breathe slowly. 'When stress builds, a simple breathing exercise will restore calm and clarity of thought. Breathe slowly and evenly through your nostrils – this helps control the volume of air you're inhaling. Slowly count 1001, 1002, 1003, 1004, then count back down again as you breathe out through your mouth. Imagine you're breathing into your elbows to help open your chest. Or rest a finger on your bottom left rib and breathe into it. Don't get too hung up on technique, though – just think "wide and beautiful". If you're too stressed to breathe slowly at first, just breathe and hold, then release slowly. Do this 30 or 40 times for

three to five minutes, until calm is restored. It's the most discreet and effective medicine with no side effects, and is one you can carry with you at all times. Practise it at home when you're not stressed to perfect the technique.'

Another solution is exercise – tackling stress and posture, and optimising the lungs all at once. 'A blast of exercise encourages deep breathing and lung expansion,' says Margo. 'This gets them working at vital capacity again, which is what they need.'

An added benefit of remembering to sit up and breath properly is better posture, which then encourages better breathing habits in the long term. The two

go hand-in-hand. When you straighten up, your spine becomes a healthier 's' shape. And with improved posture comes less back pain and fewer headaches.

We're back to that avalanche of health benefits. 'Optimal breathing will boost your health across the board because your whole body is working more efficiently,' says Margo. 'It will improve posture, reduce stress, enhance digestion and lift energy levels, making you feel happier and healthier.'

Taking slow, deep breaths also releases endorphins, the body's natural opiates, which produce a sense of wellbeing and help reduce pain – a technique used in childbirth for years and recently backed up by new research. Scientists at Barrow Neurological Institute, St Joseph's Hospital and Arizona State University, in the US, carried out a study using two groups of women aged 45-65. One group had fibromyalgia (pain in the connective tissues), the other was used as a healthy control. Both groups were given low to moderate heat pulses while breathing normally, and again while they were breathing at half their usual rate. In

Optimal breathing will improve posture and digestion, cut stress and boost energy

both cases, the results showed that slow breathing made the pain less intense.

And happy lungs can also promote good sleep, according to sleep expert Dr Neil Stanley. 'Anything that makes you healthier during the day, such as reducing stress levels, can help you sleep better at night. But most effective is "mindful" breathing, where you gently breathe in and out to quieten your mind and help you relax. It can play a vital role in your evening wind-down routine, replacing