

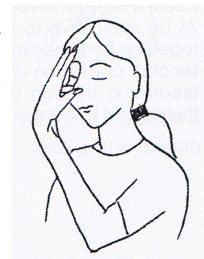
Alternate nostril breathing

Information Sheet

The Sanskrit for alternate nostril breathing is nadi shodhana. The word 'nadi' means energy channel and 'shodhana' means purification. Thus nadi shodhana is a cleansing breath. It purifies the nadis, balances the left and right brain hemispheres and has a very calming effect on the mind.

How to Practice

- Assume a sitting position, with the back comfortably straight. If you cannot sit comfortably in a yogic posture, sitting on a chair is fine. The main thing is for the spine to be fairly straight.
- Bring your right hand up and place the fore finger and middle finger between the eyebrows (nasagra mudra).
- Use the right thumb to close off the right nostril and breathe in through the left nostril. Then close the left nostril with the ring finger, release the thumb and breathe out through the right nostril. Breathe back in through the right nostril, close with the thumb and out through the left again. This makes one round.
- Continue like this — out and in through one nostril, then out and in through the other nostril. Keep the breath comfortable and relaxed. There is no need to strain.



Practice tips

1. If you find that one nostril is blocked or the nose feels a bit stuffy, then close one nostril and do a few short sharp sniffs through the other nostril. Repeat on the other side.
2. When you first practice just do 1 or 2 minutes, slowly build up to 5 minutes and then even 10 minutes if you feel to.
3. If your right arm becomes tired, you can support the right arm by holding under the elbow with the left hand.
4. If you are incorporating alternate nostril breathing into your yoga practice, you would do this after the asanas and before the meditation.
5. Although a formal practice is useful this practice can be used in your daily life when you are feeling upset or stressed. To just stop and do a minute or two of alternate nostril breathing can bring you back to your centre.

More advanced practices

Psychic alternate nostril breathing

Once you have become really comfortable with alternate nostril breathing, you can start to practice psychic alternate nostril breathing. This is where you breathe normally but imagine you are breathing in through the left nostril and out through the right, back in through the right and out through the left. So when you breathe in you focus on your left nostril, then breathe out and focus on your right nostril and so on.

After practicing regularly you may find that you can actually control the breath moving in the nostrils without using your hands — breathing in and out through alternate nostrils. If you focus your attention behind the nose above the upper palate you can find the switch that controls this (it is a subtle muscular contraction).

This practice is more effective if you count the breaths, otherwise there is a tendency for the mind drift off. Counting keeps the mind focused.

You can start by counting backwards from 9 - in 9, out 9, in 9 out 9...in 8, out 8, in 8, out 8.. .and so on. When you get to 6, breathe in and out through both nostrils together twice before continuing with the alternate nostril breathing. When you get to 1, breathe in through both nostrils before starting from 9 again. When you find you can easily stay with the counting (i.e. you don't lose count because your mind has wandered) then you can count backwards from 27. Whenever you reach a 6 or a 1, breathe in through both nostrils together.

Controlled breathing with anta kumbhaka (inner breath retention)

Instead of breathing naturally the duration of the in breath and the out breath is controlled and the breath is held in. So see if you can breathe in for a count of 3, and then hold the breath in for a count of 3 before breathing out for a count of 3.

After each exhalation, inhale immediately through that nostril again for a count of 3. When this is easy for you, extend the counting to 5.

Practice 10 rounds of this.

Benefits

- Alternate nostril breathing is excellent for balancing the nadis, the left and right brain hemispheres and thus balances and calms the nervous system.
- Because it works on the pituitary gland (the master hormonal gland), alternate nostril breathing can help to regulate the whole of the hormonal system. It is especially helpful for people suffering from PMT and menopause.
- It clears the mind and improves concentration and memory — making it excellent for those engaging in mental work (but don't do too much!).
- It is a very calming technique and can help to reduce feelings of stress and anxiety, while at the same time increasing vitality.
- It is a great preparation for meditation, bringing the mind quite quickly into theta brain wave — deeply settled mind.
- If you find you can't sleep at night because your mind is really busy, you may find your left nostril is closed. If this is the case then you can either close the right nostril with your thumb and breathe through the left nostril or do the alternate nostril breathing. If the left nostril is so blocked that you cannot do this then try the psychic alternate nostril breathing.

Precautions

- Never force the breath during alternate nostril breathing — if you feel like you are straining then discontinue the practice.
- Gradually build up your practice - start with the basic practice and build up the time when you are comfortable.
- This should not be practiced straight after meal - wait at least an hour.

About Swara Yoga

There is a branch of yoga called swara yoga, where practitioners have the awareness on their breath moving in the nostrils at all times. The breath moving in the nostrils relates to the activity of the brain hemispheres. When the left nostril is open the right brain hemisphere is predominantly active, and when the right nostril is open the left brain is active.

Swara yoga practitioners learn to control the breath moving in the nostrils and thus control the activity of the two brain hemispheres, according to the type of activity they might perform in daily life. For example, for sleeping they will activate the right brain hemisphere — the passive, intuitive, creative and lunar side of the brain. This is done by opening the left nostril. Whereas during such activities as eating, working and talking, it is preferable for the left brain to be active — the active, logical and rational side. This is done by opening the right nostril.

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