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Breathing Exercises – Safe & Effective [James Gini](#)

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Begin this exercise by spreading both hands, fingers together, but thumbs spread apart from the fingers. The next step is to place the fingers over the upper abdomen just below where the ribs meet. Be sure the fingers are pointing forward and toward the center of the body and the thumbs are pointing backward on the lower ribs just below where the diaphragm is located. Then you™ want to breathe in and out deeply and very slowly while making a little “wind” noise. If the hands are moving in and out with each breath, that will be an indication that you are breathing properly.

For some students, a good secondary feedback is to make a little audible breath noise when breathing. This will increase awareness of the breath as it enters and leaves the body and will help encourage deeper, yet more subdued breathing, allowing them to connect the breath to the actions that they are feeling in their abdomen, lower ribs and back. To get the desired feedback, do not make a whistling, sighing noise or gesture that causes the shoulders to rise and the ribs to expand and then collapse, as this will inhibit a good relationship between the body and the larynx resulting in undo tension.

Performing this exercise allows you to feel the expansion of the epigastric region, the area between the bottom of the sternum and the navel extending outward to the lower part of the rib cage on each side as you inhale. Initially, this feeling of expansion and movement of the lower ribs may be very slight and difficult to notice. If the hands are not moving visibly in and out during this exercise, you are most likely not using your support muscles correctly or not inhaling as deeply and fully as necessary. The best advice is to keep repeating the exercise, and over time you™ be able to more easily achieve the desired results. It is important to remember, the movement should always be a comfortable and natural act. Forcibly expanding the abdominal wall may cause a number of actions that can diminish lung volume and contribute to the rate of rising subglottic pressure.

Sometimes when a singer feels he or she is not using her breath properly, they will place their hand on their upper abdomen while performing. The hand on the diaphragm serves as a reminder to focus on that area of the body. Many students find that actually keeping both hands on the abdomen during SINGING LESSONS is a great way to stay focused until breathing correctly becomes second nature.

Another way to measure whether or not you™re using your muscles correctly is to perform this exercise in front of a mirror. What you™re looking for is to make sure your chest and shoulders do not rise. As the lungs fill up with air and expand there may be some subtle movement, but there should not be any excessive chest displacement and the rib cage should not collapse between breaths. This can be avoided by breathing deeply, yet naturally and feel the muscles in your back and abdomen “supporting” the diaphragm’s movements. Any tension building up in your jaw, neck or chest is a sign that you are forcing the issue and need to maintain a sense of relaxation.

When you first begin any new exercise regimen, it is expected that you will experience some tiredness or mild strain as the muscles are being worked. This is also true when beginning a breathing exercise program. That is to say if you are properly exercising the intercostal muscles, those that wrap around the rib cage, between the ribs themselves, you should notice that same kind of “tiredness”. Over time your muscles will become stronger and it will feel much more natural to breathe correctly while singing.

This type of exercise can be augmented by making audible breath noises to increase awareness of the breath as it enters and leaves the body. However, since silent breath renewals are necessary

during singing tasks they need to be practiced. In the event that a singer is a noisy breather or they are unable to breathe low enough into the body due to a poorly prepared vocal tract, it is recommended they try nose breathing. The objective of nose breathing is to slow down the pace at which the singer fills up his or her lungs to capacity. This allows the singer to maintain the gesture of inhalation over a longer period of time, which in turn ideally positions the vocal tract, the larynx and the musculature of the abdominal wall.

It is essential that this pacing of inhalation or "breath-pacing"™ be perfected if a singer hopes to be able to regulate their air efficiently. By pacing the breath intake, the singer will learn how to equal the amount of air taken in during breath renewals to the amount of air required to perform any given vocal task. This will also help the singer take in air at regular intervals and help him or her avoid unsteady breathing throughout the breath cycle. In time, this will eliminate the singer's need to "gasp for air"™ during quick breath renewals, or inhale excessively or hold the breath in advance of the next phrase.

While rhythmic pacing exercises can be an effective method of breath management, it should always be practiced in a comfortable range. One example would be to, at a moderate tempo, sing onset measures of quarter notes, taking a silent breath (a quarter note of rest) either through the mouth or the nose after each note. A brief sustained note can be completed after each measure or two of quarter notes. As the singer progresses, the tempo of the exercise and the duration of the individual notes can be shortened or lengthened to match the intervals of rest between phrases. The ultimate objective of these exercises is to help the singer take breaths at more regular intervals, thus gaining control and steadiness over the breath cycle and maintaining a sense of calm and relaxation as he or she approaches preparation for singing a phrase.

Once the correct breathing mechanism has been established and you discover how your breath fuels the voice, it's™ time to applying it to your singing.

The first step is to pay special attention to all aspects of your breathing while singing a single line of a relatively simple song. To avoid feeling as though you are running out of breath, inhale silently and only take in the amount of air needed to comfortably complete the phrase and support the tone. The next step is to sing two lines of the song in succession. Be sure you are pacing your breath to match your air levels to the phrases. You will also want to avoid holding back the breath energy or rapidly pushing out the breath. As your technical skills improve, you should gradually increase the difficulty of the songs that you sing.

Gaining an understanding of the connection between the breath and the voice can be accomplished by a technique called "breathing out the voice"™. This is done by inhaling to feel the movement of the upper abdomen and lower ribs, and say "Ahhh" while exhaling (duration of two to three seconds). In order to better feel the air whoosh from your body, switch to just an "Ah" sound towards the end of the exhale. This "breathing out the voice"™ technique will let you feel how the entire exercise happens on one continuous stream of breath. You'll™ also be able to experience how the body supports the breath and the action of the diaphragm whether or not there is sound being made at the laryngeal level.

Another valuable tool to help develop proper breath management is the "Farinelli Maneuver," a breathing exercise that moves the student toward the appoggio technique. This is a technique that helps you gain better control over the breathing mechanism through training the muscles of the chest and the abdominal wall to produce a determined action on diaphragmatic movement, thus giving the singer the feeling of still inhaling during exhalation.

The Farinelli Maneuver involves inhaling deeply and quickly, then suspending (but not "holding"™) the breath while keeping the abdomen and lower ribs in the "outward"™ position of inhalation for three seconds. Once you are stronger and have better muscle control, increase the duration to four or five seconds. Be sure to exhale slowly so that by the end of the exhale the abdominal wall returns to its resting, inward position. The goal of this exercise is to help you build stamina and strength, which will allow you to better regulate and better use your air flow.

Once you've mastered the initial step of this maneuver, you'll want to continue developing control over all aspects of the breath cycle and increasing the length of time that you are able to maintain the initial position of inhalation. First, gradually pace quiet inhalation for over four seconds and maintain that position without inhaling nor exhaling nor holding your breath. This will incite laryngeal and abdominal tensions, and produce overly firm glottal closure and impede flow phonation during singing. Finally, quietly and evenly exhale for a count of four seconds, allowing the diaphragm to gradually rise and return to its "resting" position near the end of the breath cycle. As this technique becomes easier, you'll want to slowly increase the time spent in each of these three steps, up to ten seconds each until the total of thirty seconds becomes comfortable. When practicing these methods, be careful not to allow yourself to get to the point where you're pushing air out at the end of the breath cycle or where you feel as though you have to gasp for air in order to replenish the lungs with "fresh" air.

It is recommended that these exercises be repeated several times a day, every day. They can easily and inconspicuously be done in the car, at work or in a classroom. And remember, breath renewals should always be relaxed, quiet and well paced.

In an upcoming article, we will take a look at some exercises to avoid and expose some of the myths associated with the claims that there are beneficial tools for those just LEARNING TO SING.

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