



Breathing exercises to  
remedy serious illnesses

## Description

# Exercises to build strength, reduce stress, alleviate insomnia and become healthier

By **Craig Cormack**

**Breathing exercises** have formed the core of my healing, having a major impact on my life. For many years I suffered from depression and with insomnia and panic attacks as well. If I didn't have the support of my Tai Chi Master, Irving Leong, along with my friends and family I might not be writing this article.

For 15 years I have been teaching breathing techniques... Many of my students have expressed their appreciation saying they feel better, more confident and relaxed after class.

Irving taught me **Tai Chi** and **Qi Gong**, two of the greatest gifts I have ever received. Both of these arts featured the regulation of breathing. Through this, I was able to remedy depression, insomnia and panic attacks.

For 15 years I have been teaching breathing techniques along with cardio and balance exercises to seniors living in residences in Montreal. Many of my students have expressed their appreciation saying they feel better, more confident and relaxed after class.

## Breathing exercises help improve the life of COPD patients

**COPD** (Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) is defined when patients experience difficulty breathing because of chronic obstruction of airflow. Breathing exercises such as the kind you find in Yoga or Qi Gong training have shown promise in mitigating COPD.

In a research article published in *Chest Journal*, researchers compared young COPD patients with their elderly counterparts. This was a small study with 47 participants including 19 elderly patients over 81 years of age and 31



~~younger patients over 61 years of age (3 participants dropped out).~~

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Both groups had very similar baselines and completed a pulmonary rehabilitation program with breathing exercises. Significant improvements in both groups were noted. “Researchers concluded that comprehensive outpatient and inpatient pulmonary programs are as beneficial in older COPD patients as they are in young patients with similar lung function abnormalities.”<sup>1</sup>

‘Breathing exercises such as the kind you find in Yoga or Qi Gong training have shown promise in mitigating COPD.’

Researchers suggested that patients 15 years or older should be considered for comprehensive pulmonary rehabilitation.

## **Breathing exercises mitigate hypertension in elderly adults**

In a small Korean study, researchers found that abdominal breathing exercises had a significant effect on the systolic and diastolic **blood pressure** readings.<sup>2</sup>

## **Breathing exercises and Asthma**

Researchers in Sao Paulo Brazil conducted a 16-week study with 14 asthmatic patients aged 60 years and older and diagnosed with mild to severe **asthma**. Participants were tested for lung function, respiratory muscle strength, aerobic capacity, quality of life and clinical presentation.

After 16 weeks significant positive changes were noted with increases in maximum inspiratory pressure and expiratory pressure. Considerable improvement in quality of life was also noted with fewer respiratory problems. When the exercise was discontinued, detraining was noted. Detraining occurs when people lose what they have gained by becoming sedentary.

Researchers said, “respiratory impairment tends to be more intense with elderly people with asthma due to pre-existing comorbidities and anatomical and functional changes associated with the natural ageing process.”<sup>3</sup> Comorbidities are the other health issues that are present in a person as they age.

‘... significant positive changes were noted with increases in maximum inspiratory pressure and expiratory pressure. Considerable improvement in quality of life was also noted with fewer respiratory problems.’

Also, many ageing people tend to hyperinflate, this shortens the respiratory muscles impacting their function causing forced expiration resulting in upper-thoracic breathing. This consumes a lot of energy and can lead to respiratory failure.

## **Hyperinflation can be remedied by teaching seniors to breathe from the abdomen**

Eight women and six men completed this study. Researchers found, “Specific inspiratory muscle training has been shown to improve inspiratory muscle strength and endurance and to result in reduced asthma symptoms, hospitalizations for asthma, emergency department visits, absence from school and work and medication



consumption (bronchodilation agents) in patients.”<sup>4</sup>

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## **Breathing exercises and chronic heart failure**

Chinese researchers tested the effect of breathing exercises on patients with **chronic heart failure**. They selected 80 participants, 40 experimental and 40 control, 77 completed the study.

Researchers found that both the heart rate and blood pressure values dropped significantly in the experimental group. Also, the experimental group could walk a further distance than the controls in a 6-minute time test.<sup>5</sup>

## **Effects of yoga breathing therapy on respiratory muscle function**

A Spanish study reported in the *Journal of Geriatric Physical Therapy* involving 81 people put into three different groups including a control, a yoga breathing, and another breathing group. The study period lasted 6 weeks at 5 days per week. The average age of participants was 85 years.

‘The research found that Yoga breathing exercises did in fact affect the muscle training for breathing and recommended more studies.’

Researchers tested whether Yoga breathing exercises were as effective as standard breathing exercises. They noted that many elderly people are too frail to practice whole-body exercises and therefore wanted to test breathing exercises as a viable alternative. Researchers also noted that seniors lose respiratory muscle strength as a large part of “geometric changes in the thoracic cage, the reduction of costovertebral joint mobility, the degradation of neuromuscular recruitment patterns as well as the loss of muscle fibre type. Maximum respiratory pressures decline with ageing becoming critically low in the eighth and ninth decades.”<sup>6</sup>

The research found that Yoga breathing exercises did in fact affect the muscle training for breathing and recommended more studies.

A Brazilian study with 76 participants also tested two groups, one with Yoga breathing and a control. Researchers found similar results to the ones reported in the Spanish study. “Yoga breathing exercises help improve respiratory function in elderly subjects.”<sup>7</sup>

## **What should we conclude from this?**

It looks like breathing exercises could be used for a myriad of health conditions. Certainly, more research needs to be done. Breathing exercises are easy to teach, cost next to nothing to deliver to the public and can pay dividends in lowering health costs.

Also, breathing exercises appear to give great benefit to seniors who are too frail to perform full-body exercises. Frail seniors can rebuild respiratory muscle strength if they practice breathing exercises regularly. Blood pressure and heart rates improve with regular training as well.

‘The most important part is practice. Once you learn the techniques you must practice and then you can change your life for the better forever.’

I know from my own experience on my healing path that breathing exercises have helped me to turn my life around,



to build my strength, reduce stress, sleep better and become a healthier human being. I have seen these kinds of results in my students and patients as well. The most important part is practice. Once you learn the techniques you must practice and then you can change your life for the better forever.

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1. Article | Health and Wellness

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1. asthma
2. breathing exercises
3. COPD
4. craig cormack
5. insomnia
6. Yoga breathing

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