

Breath control

How you inhale can not only facilitate recovery but also help with performance during aerobic activities, says **Hilary Achauer**

Of all the things to worry about when working out — what exercise to do, how fast to go, how much to lift — breathing seems as if it should come near the bottom of the list. You do it automatically, so why complicate things?

To a certain extent, experts say, that approach is correct. As your exercise gets harder, your body naturally produces more carbon dioxide. You breathe faster to expel it and bring in as much oxygen as you need.

"Your body should more or less increase or decrease your breathing in relation to your effort and need," said Dr Brian Y. Kim, a professor at the University of California, Irvine, US, and a team doctor for its athletic programme.

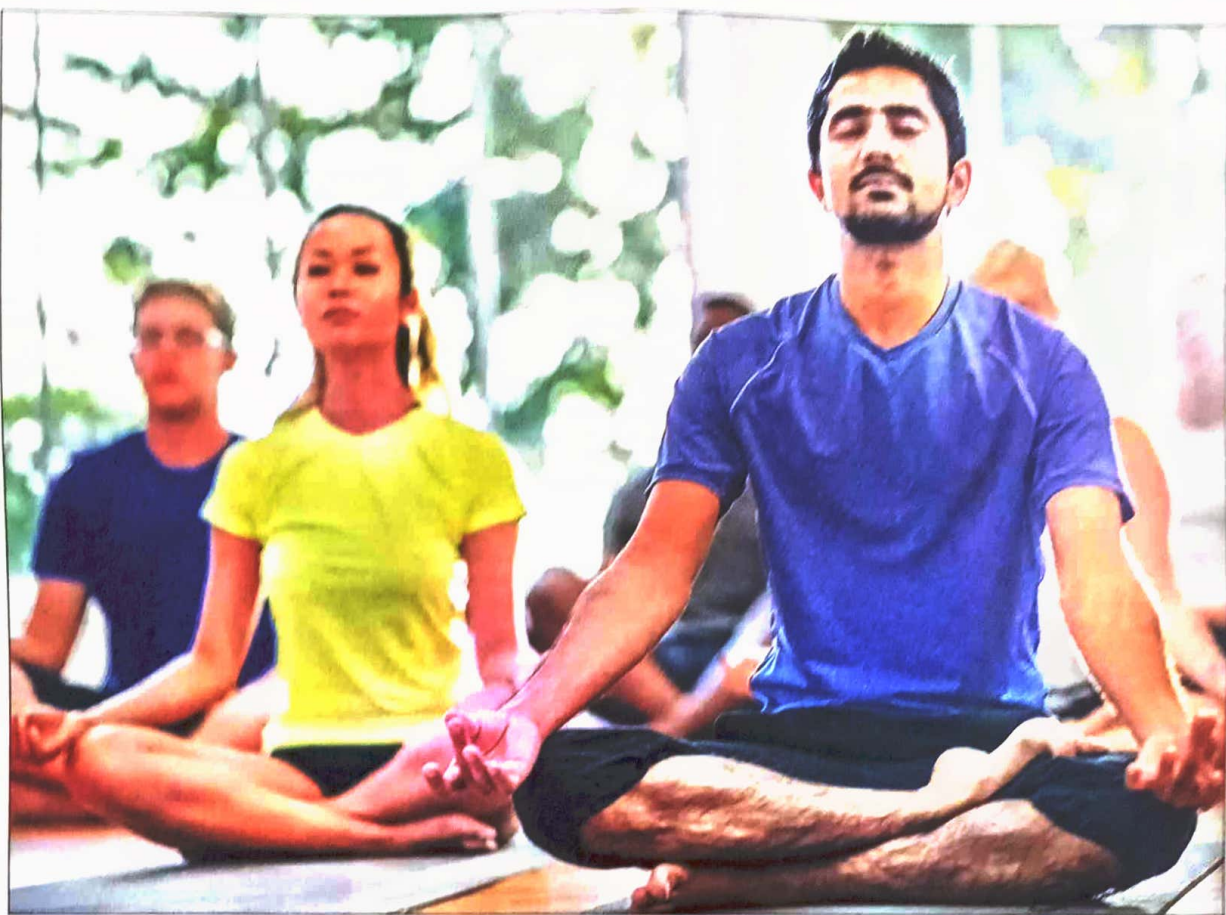
However, research suggests that some breathing techniques, including diaphragmatic breathing, can help with performance during aerobic or high intensity anaerobic activities and also encourage recovery. For other popular breathing strategies, like nasal breathing, there is little evidence that it can improve athletic performance.

The most important thing, experts said, is to avoid short, shallow breaths while exercising and make sure you're getting as much oxygen as possible. Beyond that, here's what fitness experts say about how the way you breathe can — or can't — affect your workout.

Belly breathing can help a little during aerobic workouts.

If you are interested in breathing more effectively to improve exercise performance, the first technique to try is diaphragmatic or belly breathing, said Judd Van Sickle, director of the sports performance and wellness programme at UC Davis Health in California, US. The diaphragm is a muscle at the base of your lungs, and learning to take deep breaths from your belly, not just the chest, helps deliver more oxygen to your body, he added.

If you aren't sure how to belly breathe correctly, he suggested practising what's called



"crocodile breathing".

Lie face down on the floor, with your hands under your forehead. As you breathe with your abdomen pressed into the floor, you'll find you need to expand your lower back and ribs out to the side to get a full breath. This is what belly breathing feels like. Next, try doing the same thing with each breath at some point as you go about your day and then when you are exercising.

While research shows practicing diaphragmatic breathing during exercise might only result in a 3-5 per cent improvement in performance, this type of breathing can bring other positive health benefits, including helping to reduce blood pressure and lowering resting heart rate.

For recovery, change the rhythm. Once your workout

is done, what's the best way to breathe to bounce back quickly?

The key to recovering faster is to slow down your breathing. One way to do this post-workout is with box breathing: inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, exhale for four seconds and then hold your breath for another four seconds.

Another technique is to make your exhale longer than your inhale, said Anatolia Vick-Kregel, senior assistant director of health and well-being at Rice University, US.

"When you inhale, your heart rate speeds up, when you exhale, it slows down," she said. "Take some deep breaths with emphasis on that exhale."

Don't make it too complicat-

ed. Over the past several years, some wellness influencers have claimed nasal breathing can improve exercise performance.

Breathing through your nose can have some benefits for people with asthma, Kim said, because the air gets warmer and more humid as it goes through the nose and into the lungs.

However, Van Sickle said more research is needed to show it can improve performance in general. The harder you exercise, the more difficult it is to breathe through your nose.

If you try to breathe through your nose during a HIIT workout or sprints you'll probably experience what's called "air hunger", Kim said, when your chest gets tight and you're gasping for air. "It's not something that you want to try right

away on a hard run," he said.

In addition to nasal breathing, some coaches recommend specific breathing cadences while running, like inhaling for three steps and exhaling for two.

However, research suggests that the best breathing rhythm for running is probably breathing naturally. Your body often already synchronises breathing with movement — inhaling when one foot hits the ground and exhaling with the other, which can help reduce muscle fatigue, especially at high intensity or during long workouts.

The bottom line, especially if you're new to exercising, is to just breathe normally, Vick-Kregel said. "We want people to exercise and enjoy it, not feel like they're being suffocated."

NYTNS