

How to Breathe While Running



Whether you're training for your [first 5K](#) or pounding the pavement for another 26.2 bumper sticker, one thing all runners have in common is oxygen. Breathing in and out is as natural as, well, [breathing](#). When you go for a walk, you don't actively think about taking in oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide; it just happens.

So why does breathing feel more complicated when those legs get pumping? In the days when even a [slow jog](#) can leave you panting like a dog, your internal dialogue says you must be doing something wrong.

Turns out, you may be right.

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Breathing Basics for More Efficient Running

Before you can get to the heart of better breathing, you should first understand why oxygen is so important not only to a runner's lungs, but also to a runner's muscles.

"Your muscles need oxygen in order to fire," says Bill Bishop, head coach and founder of Chicago's [Bishop Racing](#), who helps athletes achieve their competitive goals in running, swimming, cycling, and multi-sports. Your heart pumps blood, circulating it around the body and once oxygen enters the lungs, it passes through alveoli and into the blood, where it's transported to muscle cells for use in cellular respiration, he explains.

The harder you run, the more oxygen your muscles need, says Bishop. Going harder or faster may feel like a far-off goal, especially if you're more focused on simply not passing out. But the good news is that no matter what your [running goals](#) may be, breathing better can get you there.

2 Schools of Thought on Breathing for Runners

There are two main schools of thought when it comes to breathing and running: natural breathing and rhythmic breathing. Natural breathing is just as it sounds — breathing in a way that comes naturally to you.

"A lot of new runners have a tendency to overthink it and get so analytical about their breathing patterns that they don't actually just relax and breathe," says Bishop, who says this can lead to hyperventilating.

Rhythmic breathing, on the other hand, relies on your natural inhales and exhales as a guide for foot strikes. "The most common breathing rhythm of the well-trained runners I've tested is a 2-2 rhythm, which means they take two steps while breathing in — one right foot step and one left foot step — and two steps breathing out," says [running coach](#) Jack Daniels, Ph.D., associate professor at A. T. Still University in Mesa, Arizona, and two-time Olympic medalist in the modern pentathlon.

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Another effective rhythm is the five count (3-2) breath, says Beachbody's fitness and nutrition content manager [Trevor](#)

Thieme, C.S.C.S. “The goal here is to avoid beginning each exhalation on the same foot,” he says, adding that when you breathe out, your diaphragm and the muscles around it relax, reducing core stability. “If you begin each exhalation on the same foot, you’ll concentrate the impact forces on one side of your body; if you begin each exhalation on a different foot, as you will with the 3-2 rhythm, you’ll distribute those forces equally between both sides of your body, reducing your overall risk of injury.”

Experiment With the Best Breathing Style for You

While there are benefits to both styles of breathing, you won’t know what works best for you until you give it a whirl.

“Runners may think they are most comfortable with one method without ever trying another method,” says Albert Rizzo, M.D., senior medical advisor to the American Lung Association and section chief at the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine in Newark, Delaware. “There may be advantages to looking into different styles of **rhythmic running** rather than running without ever pacing yourself.”

While there are benefits to both styles of breathing, there’s one common recommendation for all types of exercise breathing: Practice making your muscular diaphragm your primary breathing muscle, instead of your chest and neck muscles, which tend to be shallow and inefficient.



4 Tips for Better Breathing for Running, and Beyond

Whether natural or rhythmic is right for you, follow this expert advice to see results that leave you breathing a sigh of relief:

- **Don’t Overdo It:** If you’re new to running, going out too hard and fast can set you back before you really get started. If you feel as though you can’t catch your breath, slow down and walk it out. If you’re really laboring, Rizzo recommends “pursed-lip breathing,” where you breathe in through the nose as if smelling the roses and then out through pursed lips as if blowing out birthday candles. “This technique can often get you back into control and start to get rid of some of that panic setting in.”
- **Nose vs. Mouth:** Studies at the University of Arizona show **breathing through your mouth** when running may be easiest for beginner runners, especially, when compared to breathing through only your nose or using both your nose and mouth. (However, if you suffer from asthma or you are running in colder climates, Rizzo says nose breathing can help filter, warm, and moisturize the air to make for easier breathing all around.)
- **Change the Rhythm:** Instead of a 2-2 or a 3-2 pace with rhythmic breathing, experiment with other patterns based on your workout and what feels best for your body. Daniels says, “A slow rhythm 4-4, for instance, allows for larger breaths but fewer of them per minute. Keep it nice and steady.”
- **Get Comfortable Being Uncomfortable:** Like any new form of exercise, it takes a while for the body to feel OK. “For newer runners, the first part of your runs are probably going to feel crappy,” Bishop says with a laugh. “Having a good

handle on your breathing allows you to feel the least crappy in the phase when your body needs to get juiced up and ready to go. Sure enough, things will come around, and you'll feel good at some point.”



Do You Ever Suffer From Side Stitches?

Side stitches are often a stabbing pain beneath your rib cage or along your side that comes during running and exercising. If you are familiar with the sudden [side stitch](#), you're not alone: 70 percent of runners experienced this pain at least once during the 2014 year surveyed, according to research published in the *New Zealand Journal of Medicine*.

While scientists have explored the reasons for the side stitch and found a number of potential causes — including excess gas and digestive issues, restriction of blood flow, and an imbalance of electrolytes — the jury is still out on the precise reason for this exercise-induced discomfort.

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To get relief, Bishop recommends easing the pain by either contracting your abdominals (try a bicycle crunch, for instance) or shifting to short-fast inhales and longer exhales until the pain passes. Another option: Slow your pace, try applying firm pressure with your fingertips into the sore spot, and just wait it out.

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