

The Dangers of Dysfunctional Breathing

By *Amy Schlinger*



Correcting this form of movement could improve your results everywhere in the gym. (Photo: Jan Von Holleben / Trunk Archive)

While there's no such thing as a magic bullet in fitness, there is one specific type of movement that, if corrected, can improve your performance and your results, whether you lift, run, swim, cycle, dance—whatever.

“Breathing is a **movement** and should be thought of as such,” says international performance consultant **Brandon Marcello**, Ph.D., MS, CSCS. A brief biology lesson: While respiration is the automatic exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, breathing is the actual coordinated movement that you must facilitate. “Having improper

breathing form is no different from having improper squat form. If you see someone squat and his or her knees collapse, you stop them right away. Yet we allow dysfunctional breathing to occur.”

How Form Affects Function: When it comes to physical activity, breathing ineffectively can alter your performance. “It would be difficult to truly hurt yourself, but you’re not using your body in the most effective manner and are relying on the secondary muscles of respiration to perform work rather than the primary,” says Marcello. You’re asking certain muscles to do extra work—if you’re playing tennis, your shoulder is not only swinging the racquet now but it’s also being used to help you inhale and exhale. It can affect your core stability, too, causing your pelvis to tilt forward or the lobe to be pressed onto the muscles in your lower back causing some pain or stiff traps.

“Having improper breathing form is no different from having improper squat form.” —**Brandon Marcello, Ph.D.**

How to Check Your Form: Put one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach, and then take a deep breath. If your chest inflates and your shoulders raise but there is no expansion in your torso, you’re a chest breather, like most adults, according to Marcello. As you inhale, your torso should expand 360 degrees, pushing your belly out. This is called diaphragmatic breathing and is the most efficient form. “If you look at babies, they all have these big bellies because they’re diaphragmatic breathing — nothing has been compromised for them yet,” says Marcello.

How To Correct Your Form: The first step is to be mindful. “Become more aware of it before you begin exercising,” suggests Marcello. “It’s easiest to focus on it that way.” It could take three to

six months to correct, but once you're doing it right and your torso is expanding 360 degrees with each breath, you'll be fine. Then your goal is to make sure when you're doing activities like stretching or lifting, you continue using this proper pattern. "If you find yourself holding your breath, it's a great indication that you've stretched too far or are lifting too much weight—you're doing something your body shouldn't be," points out Marcello.

"You'll notice you're more stable doing exercises in the gym but also just in your daily life," says Marcello. "It's going to be a lot easier to do everything."

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