

Buteyko Breathing Therapy

Can there be a right or wrong way to breathe? Does *how* we breathe really matter?

Maybe so! Professor K.P. Buteyko, a twentieth century medical scientist, discovered that many diseases as diverse as asthma, high blood pressure, arthritis, sinusitis, gastrointestinal problems, hay fever, sleep apnoea, allergies, anxiety and headaches are related to the way we breathe.

And he found that it is possible to improve our health by improving our breathing. The way we breathe, he found, is fundamental to our state of health, and is an indicator of it.

Buteyko became interested in breathing when he was a young medical student. It was his job to monitor the breathing of terminally ill patients in hospital, and he observed that as they approached death, their breathing got heavier and heavier.

Maybe their breathing got heavier because their condition was getting worse - but what if it was the other way around, he wondered. A light bulb flashed in Buteyko's mind: maybe their breathing was actually causing or exacerbating their illness!

In the 1960s Buteyko was appointed head of a unique and prestigious breathing laboratory created by the USSR's Ministry of Aviation and Space Exploration for the first missions into outer space. Thousands of volunteers were connected to large computers, and the team investigated the effects of breathing on the cardiovascular and other systems.

Buteyko found that most of us breathe too much – typically, 3 or 4 times more than our body's requirements.

This may sound incredible, because we believe that taking bigger breaths means more oxygen to the cells. But in fact, taking bigger breaths leads to *less* oxygenation of the body and brain - this is the danger of over-breathing (hyperventilation).

Normal breathing is light, almost invisible, silent and regular when we are sitting quietly, but when we are unwell our breathing is heavy and erratic - even if we are sitting doing nothing. Heavy breathing is normal only during exercise and physical exertion.

Over-breathing causes a depletion of carbon dioxide in the bloodstream, which leads to oxygen starvation in our vital organs and body systems, such as the heart, kidneys, bowels, brain and immune system.

Carbon dioxide, far from being a waste gas as is commonly believed, is essential to the body. It enables oxygenation, regulates the immune system, regulates the production and transport of all hormones, relaxes and opens airways and blood vessels, and calms the mind.

For example, low CO₂ can cause lack of oxygen in the brain, which can cause fuzzy thinking, poor memory, anxiety and/or irrational behavior. On the other hand, a disrupted immune system can mean more colds, flu, virus, allergies or can lead to auto-immune disease.

Buteyko believed that many common chronic diseases are actually compensation or defence mechanisms - the body trying to cope with seriously low levels of CO₂ – for this can even be life-threatening. Narrowing of the airways (asthma) he believed to be a defence mechanism: the body trying to prevent us breathing out too much of our precious CO₂. Many of our most common health problems, he believed, have been misunderstood and labelled as various diseases, which can be helped or rectified by normalizing our breathing.

The tendency to over-breathe is nowadays extremely common. ‘Hidden’ or chronic hyperventilation afflicts almost all of us, in varying degrees. However, most of us are convinced that our breathing is perfectly normal, and indeed, we wouldn’t notice that it isn’t, unless we’re breathing 4 or 5 times more than we need to! In food terms, this is like eating 10 or 12 meals a day!

Common signs of hyperventilation include breathing from the upper chest; sighing, snoring, yawning or coughing a lot; and waking up in the morning feeling lethargic or awakening with a dry mouth or blocked nose. But abnormal breathing upsets our body chemistry, and manifests sooner or later as various symptoms or chronic diseases.

How is it possible to improve the way we breathe, when most of the time we’re not even aware of it? Professor Buteyko developed simple techniques which he taught to hospitalized patients and to the general public with great success - to those with seemingly no hope of recovery, as well as athletes and others wanting to attain optimal health.

He and his doctors successfully treated a wide range of conditions, including chronic fatigue, panic attacks, heart disease, diabetes, indigestion, hypertension, eczema, irritable bowel syndrome, varicose veins, ulcer, tumour, obesity, snoring and many other problems – simply through breathing.

What about extraordinarily healthy people - what is their breathing like? The hatha yogis are masters of the breath. They can breathe very lightly and perform long breath-holds, which enables them to perform amazing feats ('yoga miracles'), and go without food, sleep and water for 3 - 4 days with full energy. The title of one of Professor Buteyko's public lectures about his method was: "*From spasmodic disease to the super-endurance of a yogi*" (1969).

There is no limit to how far we can improve our health and vitality through breathing!

The Buteyko Breathing method teaches in easy lessons how we can all improve our breathing. The techniques help us to breathe better unconsciously, as our respiratory centre in the brain adjusts, causing us to breathe less.

This leads to a wonderful improvement in our health. We may find that we sleep better and have more energy; our health problems may diminish or disappear, and we may even start to experience that abundant good health which is our birthright.