

Lateral Breathing: the Foundational Pilates Breathing Technique

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Have you heard of the term lateral breathing in Pilates? Lateral breathing, also called intercostal breathing, is a pattern of breath that allows the abdominal muscles to remain engaged while inhaling oxygen into the body. It is a foundational **Pilates** breathing technique. It can help increase lung capacity and make the body more resistant to environmental toxins.

When practicing this breathing technique, the low belly (aka the transverse abdominis) must remain engaged during the inhale and exhale. Rather than breathing into the belly, think of breathing into the ribcage. Use the muscles that expand your ribs and your back muscles to breathe. Visualize the breath expanding the ribs laterally like stretching a slinky.

You can use a resistance band or your hands around the ribs to help you feel this motion. By getting the ribcage to use its full movement potential, we can breathe better, move more fluidly through the spine, and allow the shoulder blades to function correctly.

How to practice lateral breathing



Lateral breathing can be a challenging technique to comprehend, let alone perform, as a beginner. Here are a few helpful tips and exercises to try in between your Pilates sessions.

[Here is a link to a lateral breathing explanation on my Instagram.](#)

1. Begin in a sitting or supine (lying on back) position.
2. Hold an elastic band around your rib cage or place your palms on the sides of your ribs.
3. Draw your navel in towards your spine and inhale into your side and back ribs. Feel the band or your hands expand and your belly “hollow” like it’s scooping toward your spine.
4. As you exhale, draw your navel more deeply toward your spine. Feel the band or your hands close together, moving closer toward your spine like when a slinky compresses. (This should be a gentle, fluid motion and you should feel your ribs glide down your trunk a little)
5. Breathe in for about 3-4 counts and out for around 5-6 counts. Keep your out breath longer than your in breath
6. Your breathing should be calm and quiet, not loud and forceful and breathe consistently through your nose.

Concentrate on your breathing and focus on staying centered and calm. This allows your ribs to fill out in *width* rather than *height*, as in regular breathing. Breathe in and out through the nose with controlled breaths and stay relaxed. The fingers or band should part as you breathe in. As you breathe out, the fingertips should move gently toward each other again.

When you are practicing, imagine there are balloons under your rib cage expanding and deflating as you breathe. As they deflate, visualize the ribs closing in and coming closer together. The lower belly (your transverse abdominis) stays gently but strongly engaged throughout this practice.

Further breathing tips:

Another great way to feel your lateral breathing is when practicing your **cat stretch**. Start on your hands and knees (called the *quadruped position*) with a long, straight spine inhale, lift the navel toward the spine. Then exhale, rounding your trunk and scoop the navel more deeply towards the spine to engage the transverse abdominis (lower belly). Inhale, straighten the spine and focus on breathing into the back of your ribs and repeat the exhale rounding the spine, pulling the navel in.

Do this two or three times a day to get a better feeling for breathing into the back and ribs, rather than the abdominal region. Be sure not to hunch your shoulders up toward your ears when rounding or let your ribs and belly disengage and hyperextend towards the floor when straightening your spine during the inhale.

Why use Lateral Breathing?

A primary component of any breath strategy is to oxygenate the blood and off-load carbon dioxide. The brain and the body need oxygen as fuel. The better we breathe the more we deliver this needed fuel to our system optimizing our brain/body functioning. This intention breathing technique creates more awareness throughout the whole body.

Because we also activate the lower abdominals during the lateral breathing cycle, we continue to strengthen a central muscle of the core. This action assists in stabilizing our pelvis and spine, creating more integrity, integration and safety in movement.

When we breathe into our lower belly, the lower abdomen expands forcing the deep core to disengage. With lateral breathing, the abdominal muscles remain pulled in and engaged. We optimize our core stabilizing muscles while breathing well.

The importance of Lateral Breathing for Pilates



Joseph Pilates, a visionary before his time, believed in “circulating the blood to awaken the cells of the body and carry away wastes related to fatigue.” For the blood to do its work properly, he maintained that “it must be charged with oxygen and purged of waste gases through the breath.” He believed breathing deeply was essential because it increased circulation and rejuvenated the body.

We now have much more scientific data explaining the importance of the breath in stillness and movement. In addition to enhancing our ability to oxygenate the brain and body, strengthen the core and mobilize the rib cage and spine, lateral/intercostal breathing helps maintain focus and correct posture in both Pilates and other rigorous workouts. This breathing separates the ribs with each inhalation, pulling the segments of the spine apart which reduces pressure on the discs and helps to develop lengthening and strengthening of the torso.

And quality, focused breathing helps to cleanse the lymphatic system of toxins, clarifies the mind, reduces stress and creates a sense of overall well-being. COVID and other respiratory challenges caused by the fires and smoke in different parts of the country the past few years has us facing many respiratory illnesses. Now is a great time to work on this Pilates principle.

Try these methods to practice lateral breathing without conducting any other exercises and then try to maintain this breath pattern in a couple of your favorite Pilates movements. You will notice how much easier the exercises are with lateral breathing!