



Breathing; and performance

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Most people understand that breathing is important to get oxygen into our bodies as fuel for our body tissues. Many people have heard that correct breathing is important in yoga. However, few people know that how you breathe can drastically affect your health in the long term and your riding performance in the short term.

The ideal breathing pattern for daily life and sport is into the lower ribs. Put your hands on the outside of your rib cage and ensure that your shoulders don't move and your belly doesn't puff out. Allow the air into the back of your lower ribs and feel that your ribs open out to the side. If you tighten your stomach muscles, as if someone was going to try and push your belly in, you should still have good rib mobility. This allows you to have good core activation while walking, riding and exercising. If not talking, eating or exercising heavily, the lips should be sealed, the teeth parted and the mid tongue resting against the roof of the mouth. The breath out should be 2 counts longer than the breath in. Use the horse steps as your count if you are riding.

All of these elements combined help to calm the nervous system (overcome show ring nerves), relax the upper body (free up your arms and stop pulling), allows the spine to move in a supported way (gives your seat more stability without bracing), and prevents your heart from overworking. Research has shown that heart rate can increase to 80-100% of the maximal safe range while jumping a course in competition. Breath holding or breathing in a different pattern may further increase the heart rate. If a rider breathes too shallowly (shoulders move), quickly, or with mouth open, even for a minute or so, their judgment ('should I move up or wait') and short term memory ('where IS my next fence') may be affected.

Practice this breathing pattern in all aspects of your life (sitting in your car is a great place) and discover how much more easily you can calm your nerves while waiting for your round, soften your arms and secure your seat. Breathe well, live well, move well, ride well!!

(If you want to know more about the long term health effects of sub optimal breathing look up 'hypocapnia' or contact Sandra at sasok@shaw.ca)