

Breath, Work, and Chinese Medicine

Breathing is the process by which air moves in and out of the lungs. Through breathing we deliver oxygen to our body while also releasing carbon dioxide. In Chinese medicine, breath is called **qi**¹ (pronounced *chee*) — a term whose meaning can change with context. Qi is also the substance which flows through the acupuncture channels, defines the quality of organ function, relates to emotions and refers to the vital movements present and essential in any living system. Much as a fish cannot perceive the sustaining water it lives in, humans experience but cannot necessarily see qi.

Stressful situations often occur at work and this can have a direct impact on our breathing patterns and internal qi flow. If we restrain our breathing when stressed or hold our breath when experiencing frustration at work, then these patterns of interrupted breath can recur long past the point of the initial trigger. Shallow breathing can have a continuous effect on our mental, emotional and physical well-being.

Breath can also impact immunity. According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 13 percent of the U.S. population will contract the influenza virus, leading to millions of lost work days and billions in lost wages. Viruses live best in low oxygen environments. They are anaerobic. If you can raise the level of oxygen in their habitat, viruses will die. The average person will take more than 87 million breaths in their working life. Mindful breathing can help us slow down our breath, which in turn helps us to deliver more oxygen to our system. This can allow for numerous health benefits including better immunity, a decrease in pain and an increase in mental alertness.

Here's a simple mindful breathing exercise you can do at your workplace to cultivate mindfulness and improve the quality of your health.

Take a few slow and deep breaths, breathing into your abdomen. Pay attention to the timing of your inhalations and exhalations. After the start of an ordinary exhalation, open your mouth wide and let the air flow out as freely as you can. The air should move out on its own as your diaphragm relaxes, without any pushing or forcing on your part. You might notice tension in your jaw, neck or throat. Simply notice these things and allow the tension to relax, visualizing your airway is as spacious and relaxed as it can be. After you have done these “open-mouthed” exhalations a few times, go back to your normal rhythmic breathing.

To deepen the exercise, take note of the following:

- What are the differences you notice before and after the exercise?
- Where is the tension?
- Where are you relaxed?

Repeat these practices and you will become aware of the quality and process of your breath.

Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture and mind-body techniques such as qigong are also safe and natural complements to other strategies for improving immunity and reducing stress.



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¹**Qi** (pronounced *chee*) is an East Asian term whose meaning changes with context. In medicine, qi can mean breath, a substance which flows through the acupuncture meridians, or the vital movements necessary and present in every living system.