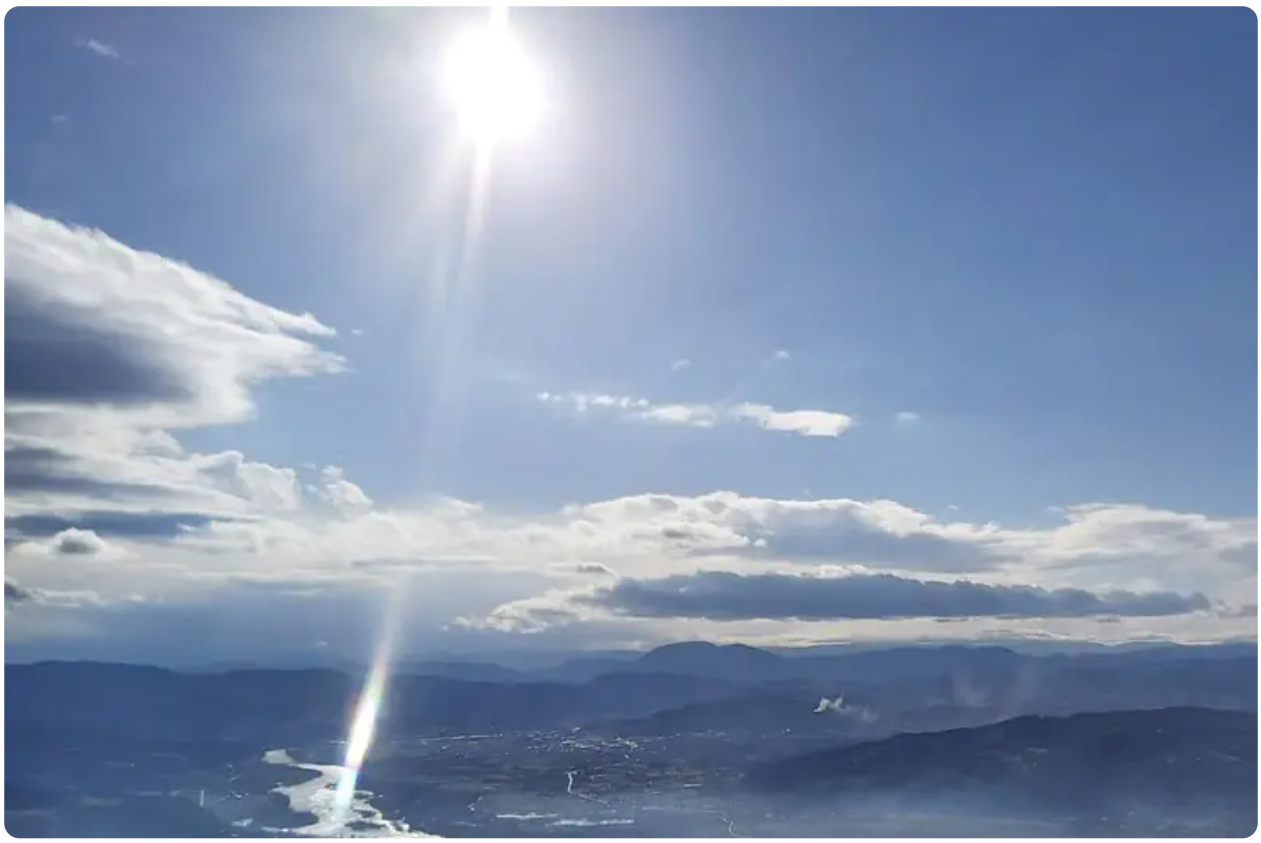
Swimming and correct breathing

Swimming and time in the water are good for body and spirit · Yoga Loznica · 8 February 2021

Swimming is a good way to breathe deeper and calmer. Here is how the rhythm of movement and the rhythm of the breath become one.



> **Note.** With heart or lung difficulties we swim and breathe moderately. We do not practise holding the breath under water alone, and in the water we swim with company or under a lifeguard's supervision.

Swimming is one of the most natural forms of movement and, when practised regularly and moderately, one of the most useful physical activities. The rhythmic movements lead the swimmer to deep, controlled breathing, similar to pranayama. To get the most out of swimming, we match the breathing to the rules of complete (three-layer) yoga breathing [1].

> ***Swimming is a natural, primal movement of the body that leads the swimmer to the right rhythm of breathing.***

What swimming and breathing do for the body

Swimming engages several systems at once: the **respiratory system** (lungs and breathing muscles), the **cardiovascular system** (the heart works evenly), the **musculoskeletal system** (the joints are relieved and the muscles work through the whole body) and the **nervous system** (the rhythm of movement calms thoughts). Through the nervous system the **endocrine system** also receives a calm rhythm, and it keeps the other systems in step. When the rhythm of movement and the rhythm of breathing are matched, many people feel more freshness and energy after a month or two of regular swimming [1].

What the research says

In a trial with 27 competitive swimmers (aged 13 to 20), a month of yogic breathing, half an hour five times a week, improved lung function and reduced the number of strokes per breath compared with a control group [2]. A review of 10 trials showed that training the breathing muscles improves swimming results [3], and a more recent review of 14 studies with 375 competitors links it with stronger inspiratory muscles and better aerobic swimming [4].

The trial [2] also measured anxiety before competition; the practices were sectional breathing, bellows breathing and alternate nostril breathing with breath holding. The reviews [3] and [4] deal with training the breathing muscles using devices, not with yogic breathing. In one trial with 28 fin swimmers, training with intermittent breath holding increased lung parameters and improved results, but the oxygen saturation of the blood after effort was lower [5]; that is why we do not force breath holding and do not practise it under water without supervision.

Breathing and body weight

A common opinion is that swimming can make you lose weight. Many people swim regularly and their weight does not change. The reason is that even good swimmers often do not breathe correctly, and an acquired habit is hard to change [1]. So the first thought about swimming should be care for our own health, not only weight.

Around us we see many middle-aged people who are unhappy with their body weight, whether they are overweight or too thin. They are often people who used to play sport actively and stopped because of obligations. Few decide on pranayama exercises, and when they do, weak lung capacity and weak endurance often make progress hard; holding the breath is then unpleasant. In such a situation swimming can be a pleasant and gentle alternative.

The authors [1] go on to state that body weight is affected by the glands with internal secretion and that balanced breathing and rhythmic movement can support their balance.

The activity alone does not bring lasting change, but the habits we adopt while swimming can. Breathing is learned gradually: nobody becomes a good swimmer without learning to save their breath. Endurance swimmers rarely breathe in, and let the air out while the face is in the water, which is in essence three-layer yoga breathing.

How to breathe in breaststroke

Breaststroke is best for a start. The whole secret is connected, rhythmic swimming without effort:

- We breathe in through the mouth or nose and lower the face into the water.
- While the face is in the water, we make two easy strokes.
- When the arms come back to the chest, we slowly breathe out through the nose, so that at the end of the fourth stroke there is just enough air left to blow the remaining drops of water out of the nose.
- Right after that we breathe in and lower the face into the water again; the sequence repeats.

In this way swimming becomes a simple pranayama exercise in the water. After a few months of practice we can gradually extend holding the breath over two strokes to more strokes, always within the limits of comfort.

Many who practise pranayama want quick progress and lack the patience to practise for at least two months without a break; exercises broken off too early rarely leave a lasting mark. A swimmer is naturally forced to hold the breath for a while with the face in the water and to watch the rhythm, and so breathes in a way that resembles pranayama. According to hatha yoga, two months of regular, simple swimming can give results similar to pranayama [1].

If we get tired, we need not stop swimming; it is enough to rest lying on the water with deep breathing. The oldest and at the same time most modern style is the crawl, which is inseparable from correct breathing: a strong breath in, then a breath out in the water through the nose during four arm strokes.

The authors recommend that we stay in the water for no longer than half an hour and leave out special breathing exercises then, and after a month or two of yoga swimming move on to regular pranayama exercises in a room, or better still in nature. In summer it is good to go to the sea, a lake or a river and swim with correct breathing, and in winter to look for an indoor pool.

If we are thin

Some people avoid physical activity because of thinness. For them swimming with conscious breathing is a good activity, because it is gentle on the joints and encourages relaxation. Water is a friend: we need not resist it, it is enough to let it carry us. That is easier said than done, but devotion and patience give good results.

Photograph

Photograph: Yoga Loznica.

Sources

1. Yesudian, S. & Haich, E. (1982). *Joga i sport* [Yoga and sport]. Aranđelovac: Napredak.
2. Hakked, C. S., Balakrishnan, R. & Krishnamurthy, M. N. (2017). Yogic breathing practices improve lung functions of competitive young swimmers. *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*, *8*(2), 99–104. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaim.2016.12.005
3. Liu, S., Gou, P. & Lin, M. (2025). The effect of respiratory muscle training on swimming performance: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Physiology*, *16*, article 1638739. https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2025.1638739
4. Chen, Y., Yi, Q., Meng, K., Tao, K., Qin, S., Yue, Y., Bao, D. & Jiang, G. (2026). Effects of respiratory muscle training on swimming performance, respiratory muscle function, and pulmonary function of competitive swimmers: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Physiology*, *17*, article 1770925. https://doi.org/10.3389/fphys.2026.1770925
5. Stavrou, V., Toubekis, A. G. & Karetsi, E. (2015). Changes in respiratory parameters and fin-swimming performance following a 16-week training period with intermittent breath holding. *Journal of Human Kinetics*, *49*(1), 89–98. https://doi.org/10.1515/hukin-2015-0111

This text is for information. Latest version: https://yogaloznica.dkd.rs/swimming-and-breathing.html