

EXHALE THROUGH NOSE OR MOUTH?

“Breathing is the first act of life and the last. Our very life depends on it. Since we cannot live without breathing it is tragically deplorable to contemplate the millions and millions who have never mastered the art of correct breathing.”

Joseph Pilates had much to say about breathing, but whether to exhale through the mouth or nose wasn't one of them. I think most of us will agree that the best way to inhale is through the nose to warm and filter the air as well as measure the breath, but students of Joseph Pilates never recall him insisting even on this. Some methods teach breathing in and out only through the nose, some will teach in through the nose and out through the mouth, some will leave it to the student. The most important thing is to breathe fully and efficiently:

“Lazy breathing converts the lungs, literally and figuratively speaking, into a cemetery for the deposition of diseased, dying and dead germs as well as supplying an ideal haven for the multiplication of other harmful germs.”

Some instructors have other methods of breathing, notably Ron Fletcher's percussive breathing or active breathing which sounds like short and repeated hissing sounds on the exhale, commonly used by body builders and deep-sea divers. Joe Pilates did a bit of body building in his early days, so was this a method he shared with Fletcher who was a student of his? Research confirms that it increases the body's absorption of oxygen, so perhaps it is a useful way to get more from a Pilates workout rather than an essential method?

Even lateral/thoracic breathing wasn't a Joe Pilates “invention”, but rather something we now teach rather than allowing it to happen naturally, which it most certainly will if you inhale with a strong core contraction. This is one of the reasons why it's easier for beginners to exhale on the most challenging phase of an exercise as the core muscles will naturally engage, thus consciously coordinating thoracic breathing with core contraction isn't such an issue.

“ You must squeeze every atom of impure air from lungs until they are almost as free of air as a vacuum”.

So why do I teach inhaling through the nose, exhaling from the mouth? I come from a fitness background and have always pushed myself. Exhaling through the mouth, more blowing out really, enables a stronger core contraction in my experience, making for a safer workout. It also allows for more efficient “emptying” of the lungs:

“The lungs cannot be completely deflated at first without considerable effort. With perseverance, however, the desired results can be accomplished and with increasing power, gradually and progressively develop the lungs to their maximum capacity.”

According to the Anti-stress Foundation

“it helps you suck pain and fatigue out of the muscles and helps release them from the body. It enables you to focus and relax, and dramatically improve your memory and concentration. It is also a way to focus our attention and become aware of the subtle energies that travel in and out of the body and energy channels.”

Although it’s useful to learn the fundamentals of Pilates including the preferred breathing method according to your instructor, I always prefer to get students moving as soon as possible so that their body’s will respond in the appropriate, natural way. Too many courses overcomplicate Pilates and keep students learning the breathing and pelvic positioning for weeks on end looking for perfection, but losing their students interest in the process. Breathe fully and efficiently and if you can’t do this during an exercise, you are working at a level too advanced for you. You can breathe in the way I suggest or otherwise – see how it feels: whatever allows you to practice safely and effectively.

“Above all, learn how to breathe correctly.”