

LEARNING TO BREATHE

In good shape but still out of breath on the swim? Learn about the 7 biggest mistakes in swim breathing and how to correct them.

BY COURTNEY B. MATHER

Most triathletes have the physical strength and stamina to be strong swimmers. So why is it that many have trouble completing 50 yards of swimming without running out of breath? As a Masters swim coach, I notice time after time that proper breathing is one of the biggest challenges faced by triathletes who are new to swimming. Thankfully, proper breathing is not difficult to learn, and once you master it, your swimming will improve measurably.

One triathlete I coached, who happened to be an exceptional cyclist and runner, approached the swim by trying to get each length of the pool over with as quickly as possible. This caused him to accelerate his stroke turnover and overuse his kick. These adaptations created further breathing difficulties, causing him to finish a lap nearly hyperventilating. After practicing simple breathing techniques both in and out of the water, he quickly gained comfort in the water, relaxed and lengthened his stroke. Eventually, he began to excel as a swimmer.

Breathing while swimming should be no more difficult than when biking or running. The best way to mark your progress is to compare breathing in water and on land. Notice whether you're making any of the following breathing mistakes:

1. Exhaling too much or not enough. Any breathing technique that would cause difficulty while running or cycling will do the same in the water. Janet Renner, a Masters swim

coach in Hawaii, says, "If you exhale everything, it takes a lot out of you and you hyperventilate—just like you would do on land. Learn what is a comfortable amount to exhale so you can swim comfortably at a steady pace for a long time."

Drill: Practice breathing naturally on land. Before getting in the water, try this: 1) Ten repetitions of inhaling naturally and exhaling naturally. 2) Ten repetitions inhaling naturally, holding at the end of inhale for a count of two, exhaling naturally. 3) Ten repetitions inhaling naturally, holding at the end of inhale for a count of four, exhaling naturally. This drill helps remind you to follow a natural breath cycle, and relaxes you before you get in the pool.

2. Attempting to both exhale and inhale when the head is turned to the side. The head turn should be reserved for inhalation. If you try to exhale and inhale while the head is turned, you will not have time to take in an adequate breath. I teach my swimmers the following breathing pattern: Hold your breath while your face is in the water. Begin to exhale gently as the head begins to rotate to the side and complete your exhalation before the mouth clears the water. Inhale immediately after the mouth clears the water.

Drill: Bobbing. Hold onto the wall in the deep end of the pool. Practice dunking under water and resurfacing to inhale. Be sure to exhale only while you are submerged, and inhale only after you come to the

surface. This drill facilitates awareness by isolating breathing from swimming. Renner recommends practicing until you are able to bob 25 times successfully without stopping.

3. Turning the head incorrectly to breathe.

Breathing should be a rotation directly to the side without lifting the head forward or tucking the chin back. According to Renner, "Improper head rotation makes you out of balance in the water and creates greater resistance and more work for yourself. Breathing is not just a way to get air, but a critical component in maintaining your body position."

4. Maintaining a flat body position.

If you stay flat, your head will have to turn independently of the rest of your body to breathe. You will then experience more difficulty in getting air. Instead, allow your body to roll with each stroke. Your head will then naturally turn with your body when it is time to breathe.

5. Not holding a rhythm.

Finding a breathing pattern and sticking to it is critical in developing a balanced stroke. Bilateral breathing (alternating breathing to the left and then to the right) promotes balance and equal rotation to both sides.

Drill: Bilateral Breathing. Practice breathing every third stroke, every fifth stroke and eventually every seventh stroke. This rhythmic breathing pattern will have you naturally turning to both sides to breathe.

6. Tensing the body. A tense body restricts breathing, engages and fatigues unnecessary mus-

cles and changes body positioning in the water. Always remember to relax!

Drill: Kick with a kickboard, face in the water, arms and kickboard extended out in front. Practice breathing to both sides. For the first 25 yards, pay attention to your breathing. On the second 25 yards, ignore your breathing and focus to your shoulders. Are they relaxed?

7. Overusing the legs. Excessive kicking is exhausting and further exacerbates the breathing problem. A natural kick should have a "beat" to it, with a rhythmic pause in between cycles.

Drill: Try different rhythms until you find one that works for you. Experiment with a two-beat kick (two kicks and then a pause), a six-beat kick (six kicks and then a pause), or any variation that feels comfortable.

By practicing and developing awareness, breathing in the pool will become just as natural as breathing on land. If you haven't already, find a good Masters swim program with a coach who can help identify any mistakes you might be making in your breathing. Check "Places to Swim" on www.usms.org or call 1-800-550-SWIM to find a Masters swim team near you.▲

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