



*There are many ways to relax. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response are simple and beneficial to your health.*

**R**elaxation has many benefits. It can help you feel better, think more clearly, and relieve stress, headaches and tight muscles. Whether you want to take a break from a stressful day or better manage your stress for the long-term, a regular practice of relaxation can really help you get back to a calmer state.

There are many ways to relax. This tip sheet outlines three methods: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response. When learning these skills, it is important to find a quiet place where you will not be disturbed.

Try to practice once or twice a day for 10 to 20 minutes each time. It may take two to three weeks to fully develop these skills, but once you've trained your mind and body to relax, you'll be able to get the same relaxed feelings on the spur of the moment.

## Deep breathing

Deep breathing can help calm you down when it is purposefully done. It can help you let go of stress and worries and focus quietly on the present moment.

### *How to do deep breathing*

Place both hands on the lower part of your stomach and breathe in deeply so that your belly gently pushes against your hands. Your stomach muscles should be relaxed. Then, gently push with your hands as you breathe out slowly. If it helps, imagine a balloon in your stomach that inflates when you inhale and deflates when you exhale. Practice this several times. When you breathe out try to imagine the tension and stress leaving your body as you exhale and say to yourself, "I am feeling relaxed and calm."

Here are some important tips for practicing this skill:

- Wear loose, comfortable clothing and find a quiet, relaxing place to practice.
- Start practicing for just one to two minutes. Slowly increase your practice time up to five minutes. Practice several times a day.
- In the beginning, it may help to practice deep breathing while

lying down on your bed or on the floor. Lie on your back, bend your knees and place your feet comfortably apart.

- If you feel light-headed, dizzy, or anxious, you may be breathing too deeply or too quickly. If this happens, stop practicing for a moment and breathe normally until the symptoms pass. Also, inhaling and exhaling through your nose can help prevent hyperventilation.
- As you progress, practice deep breathing in a variety of settings (e.g., sitting at your desk, waiting in line, or watching television).
- Be patient and gentle with yourself.

## Progressive muscle relaxation

The body responds to tense thoughts or situations with muscle tension, which can cause pain or discomfort. Over time, this tension builds up in the body. Progressive muscle relaxation is a technique that will help you reduce stress and become more relaxed. You can do it by tensing and then relaxing each muscle group until you are completely relaxed. It can reduce muscle tension as well as general mental anxiety. You can use a prerecorded tape or CD to help you go through all the muscle groups or you can follow the instructions below. Progressive muscle relaxation works well to combat stress-related health problems and often helps people get to sleep.

Note: If you have fibromyalgia or myofascial pain syndrome, check with your health care professional before practicing progressive muscle relaxation.

### *Muscle groups and procedure*

Pick a place where you can stretch out comfortably, such as on a pad or carpeted floor. Tense each muscle group for 4 to 10 seconds (hard, but not to the point of cramping). Then release the muscle and give yourself 10 to 20 seconds to relax. Try to relax each muscle group a little more each time you do this exercise.

### *How to tense muscle groups*

- Hands: Clench them.
- Wrists and forearms: Extend them and bend hands back at the wrist.
- Biceps and upper arms: Clench hands into fists, bend arms at elbows, and flex biceps.
- Shoulders: Shrug them.
- Forehead: Wrinkle it into a deep frown.
- Around the eyes and bridge of the nose: Close eyes as tightly as possible. (Remove contact lenses before beginning this exercise.)
- Cheeks and jaws: Grin from ear to ear.
- Around the mouth: Press lips together tightly.
- Back of the neck: Press head back against the pad or supporting surface.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.

- Front of the neck: Touch the chin to the chest.
- Chest: Take a deep breath and hold it, then exhale.
- Back: Arch the back up and away from support surface.
- Stomach: Suck stomach into a tight knot.
- Hips and buttocks: Press the buttocks together tightly.
- Thighs: Clench hard.
- Lower legs: Point toes toward face, as if trying to bring toes up to touch head.
- Lower legs: Point toes away and curl toes downward at the same time.

## Relaxation response

The relaxation response slows the heart rate and breathing, lowers blood pressure, and helps relieve muscle tension. In this way it can help you slow down, reduce stressful feelings and refocus your thoughts.

*How to practice the relaxation response (adapted from Herbert Benson, MD):*

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position with eyes closed.
- Become aware of your breathing. Breathing slowly and steadily, concentrate on breathing from your belly and not from your chest.
- With each exhalation, say the word “one” (or any other word or phrase) silently or aloud. As an

option, instead of focusing on a repeated word, you may choose to fix your gaze on a stationary object. Any mental stimulus will help you to shift your mind away from distracting thoughts.

- Continue this for 10 to 20 minutes. As distracting thoughts enter your mind, don't dwell on them. Just allow them to drift away.
- Sit quietly for several minutes until you are ready to open your eyes.
- Notice the difference in your breathing and your pulse rate.

Don't worry about whether you are successful in becoming deeply relaxed. The key to this exercise is to remain passive, and to let distracting thoughts slip away like waves on the beach. Practice for 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day, but not within two hours after a meal. When you have set up a routine, the relaxation response should come with less effort.

### Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org).
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.
- For a customized online stress management plan, check out our HealthMedia® Relax™ Healthy Lifestyles program at [kp.org/healthylifestyles](http://kp.org/healthylifestyles).
- Visit [kp.org/mindbody](http://kp.org/mindbody) for specific suggestions on relaxation and other stress reduction tips and techniques.