



*There are many ways you can relax. Deep breathing, muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response are simple and good for your health.*

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

There are many ways to relax. Three common methods are: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, and the relaxation response. When learning these skills, it is important to find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Try to practice for 10

or 20 minutes once or twice a day. It may take two to three weeks to fully develop these skills, but once you have trained your mind and body to relax, you'll be able to get the same relaxed feelings quickly.

### Deep breathing

When it is done with purpose, deep breathing can help calm you down. 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 inhale so that your belly pushes gently against your hands. Your stomach muscles should be relaxed. Then, gently push with your hands as you exhale 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 tension and stress leaving your body; 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 lightheaded, 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. Try inhaling and exhaling through your nose to 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. Progressive muscle relaxation will help you reduce stress and become more relaxed. It involves tensing and releasing each muscle group to create a deeper sense of relaxation. It can also reduce feelings of anxiety. You can use a recording to help you go through all the muscle groups, or you can follow the instructions below. Progressive muscle relaxation often helps with stress-related health problems and can help you fall asleep.

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

*How to do progressive muscle relaxation*

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 deeply each time you do this exercise.

*How to tense muscle groups*

- Hands: Make a fist.
- Wrists and forearms: Extend your arms and bend hands back at the wrist.
- Biceps and upper arms: Make a fist, 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.
- Front of the neck: Touch your chin to your chest.
- Chest: Take a deep breath, hold it, then exhale.
- Back: Arch your back up and away from support surface.

- Stomach: Suck your stomach into a tight knot.
- Hips and buttocks: Press your buttock cheeks together tightly.
- Thighs: Clench hard.
- Lower legs: Point your toes toward your face, as if trying to bring them up to touch your head.
- Lower legs: Point your toes away and curl them downward at the same time.

**Relaxation response**

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

*Technique (adapted from Herbert Benson, MD):*

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position with your eyes closed.
- Become aware of your breathing. Breathe slowly and steadily; breathing from your belly and not from your chest.
- Each time you exhale, say the word “one” (or any other word or phrase) silently or aloud. Or, you may choose to fix your gaze on a stationary object. Any mental stimulus will help 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 becoming deeply relaxed. The key to this exercise is to be passive, to let distracting thoughts slip away like waves on the beach. Practice for 10 to 20 minutes once or twice a day, but wait for at least two hours after a meal. When you have set up a routine, the relaxation response should come with little effort.

**Additional resources**

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org).
- Visit your facility’s Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.
- Want a customized online stress management plan? Check out our HealthMedia® Relax™ Healthy Lifestyles program at [kp.org/healthylifestyles](http://kp.org/healthylifestyles).
- Try out our Health Coach Stress Less Program at [kp.org/mindbody](http://kp.org/mindbody).
- If you are hit, hurt or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health, including your ability to manage stress. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to [ndvh.org](http://ndvh.org).

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.