

Diaphragm Breathing Page 1 – Background & Physiology

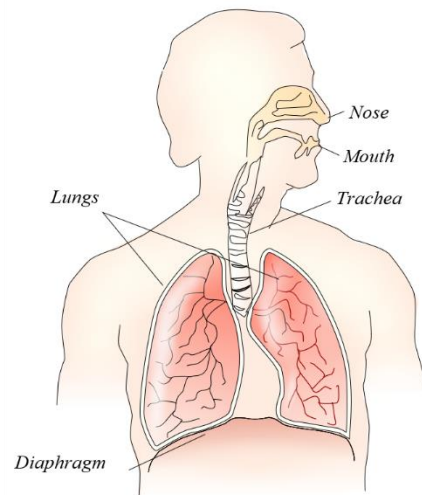
What is the diaphragm, and why is it important?

The diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle that separates the chest and abdominal cavities. Most people never give this muscle any thought as they go about their lives.

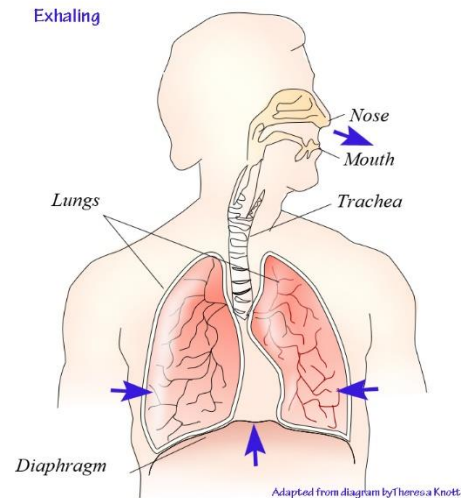
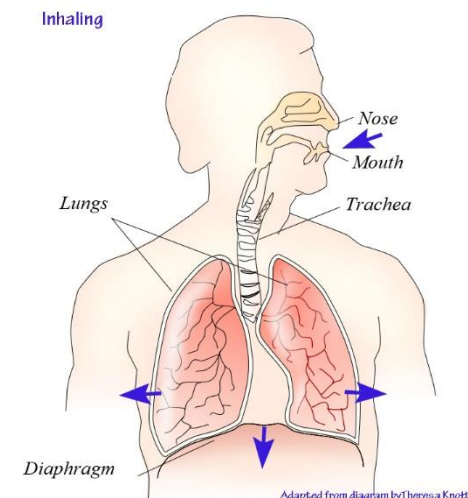
As wind players, knowing how to use this muscle properly, is key to getting a good, controlled, supported tone.

Learning how to use the diaphragm in breathing is not something you learn overnight, but is something that you can learn even when you are not playing your saxophone.

Most people only breath very shallowly, with only the top portion of their lungs.



What diaphragm breathing looks like



Think of the air supply coming from your lungs like the water from the taps in your house. It's always under pressure, and always there. The only thing that stops it from running is the taps.

In the case of the air coming from your lungs, it too needs to be under a constant pressure, with the only thing that's preventing it from coming through your horn being your tongue. NOT STOPS & STARTS.

Diaphragm Breathing Page 2 – Exercises

Like the water in the taps of your house, the air in your mouth coming from your lungs is under pressure. That means your throat has to be open—just like when you're yawning.

The pressure is maintained by the diaphragm—as well as the intercostal muscles that move your ribs and allow your lungs to inflate and deflate.

Steps for diaphragm breathing – sitting, standing, or laying down

Inhaling:

1. Place your hands on the sides of your ribs so you can feel them expand outward. At the same time push your stomach out filling the entire bottom of your torso with air.
2. Expand your lungs filling them with air. You can see this happen.
3. Feel and see the your upper chest and shoulders rise slightly as the air stream comes up to the larynx (voice box).

Exhaling:

1. Feel your shoulders and upper chest relax as you blow out.
2. Notice the mid-chest fall slightly as the air exits.
3. Pull the stomach and surrounding rib cage in as much as possible. This empties as much of the air as possible from the lungs.

Breathing Exercise that demonstrates the pressure maintained by the diaphragm & intercostal muscles

1. Breathe in quickly making sure that your abdomen is expanding. (You can place you fingers on your belly to make sure you're breathing all the way down to your diaphragm.)
2. Hold your breath by placing your tongue against the roof of your mouth. (Think "tu" or "du".) If you're doing it right, you will feel the air pressing against back of your tongue.
3. Breath out slowly by releasing the tongue. "Hoooooooooooooooooooo" will help keep your throat open (warm air) the whole time. Use your diaphragm (stomach muscles) to keep the air flowing in a controlled manner.

Diaphragm Breathing Page 3 – Yoga Breathing Exercises

Just like any other set of muscles, the intercostals and diaphragm require regular workouts to stay in top condition. But don't take my word on this. Saxophone great, Sonny Rollins, practiced yoga breathing regularly, in addition to his regular 10+ hours of daily saxophone practice.

The following 3 breathing exercises* each work on expanding a different part of your lungs and intercostal muscles.

1. Front Expansion (Vertical)

1. Stand with your back straight, and arms pointing down by your side.
2. Keep your arms straight, and then smoothly raise them forwards while breathing in until they are vertical above your head.
3. Hold your breath for a couple of seconds without closing off your throat.
4. Keeping your arms straight, lower them smoothly while exhaling until they are back by your side.

2. Front Expansion (Horizontal)

1. Stand with your back straight, and your arms straight in front of you.
2. Keep your arms straight, and then smoothly move them apart while breathing in until they are fully stretched out sideways.
3. Hold your breath for a couple of seconds without closing off your throat.
4. Bring your arms back together in front of you while exhaling.

3. Sideways Expansion

1. Stand with your back straight, and arms pointing down by your side.
2. Keep your arms straight, and then smoothly raise your arms upwards until they are stretched out over your head.
3. Hold your breath for a couple of seconds without close off your throat.
4. Lower your arms smoothly while exhaling until they are back by your sides.

*Adapted from: tamingthesaxophone.com by Pete Thomas